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IEP team decision-making process in the reintegration of special education students: A qualitative analysis of exiting decisions

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IEP TEAM DECISION-MAKING PROCESS IN THE REINTEGRATION
OF SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS: A QUALITATIVE
ANALYSIS OF EXITING DECISIONS

A Dissertation

Submitted

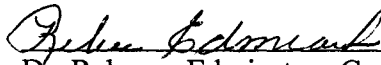
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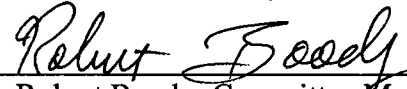
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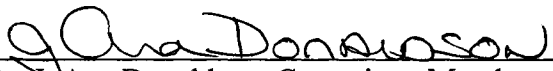
Doctor of Education

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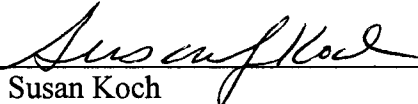
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ANALYSIS OF EXITING DECISIONS

An Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

Approved:


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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to take an in-depth look at the decision-making process that an IEP team goes through regarding the reintegration of special education students. In particular, this study looked at the exiting criteria used by an IEP team in determining whether or not a student should be exited back into the general education classroom prior to graduation. Furthermore, using Raven's (1992) Power/Interaction Model as the theoretical framework, this study also looked at the beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes of an IEP team that were adopted through the processes involved in exiting students from special education programs.

The participants represented an IEP team from a rural, 4A, Iowa, public school. The study was purposefully focused on an IEP team working with a level one (resource) special education student due to the potential for exiting. However, this IEP team was randomly selected from all IEP teams that worked with a level one (resource) special education student from this school. The IEP team consisted of the following: student, parent, special education instructor, general education instructor, administrator, and area education agency representative. The data for this study was collected from one-on-one interviews of the IEP team, observations of the IEP meeting, and field notes and reflection logs from the researcher.

Determination of whether or not to exit a high school student from a special education program into the general education classroom before graduation was the focus of this study. There are no simple rules to guide IEP teams in making placement decisions, especially in regard to exiting. However, this study identified exiting criteria

used by this IEP team during their decision-making process. Findings from this study included the following criteria used in making exiting decisions: (a) Student is meeting IEP goals; (b) student is able to self-advocate; (c) the adequacy of the general education classroom; and (d) alternative setting for post-secondary placement. In addition, by using the theoretical framework of Raven's (1992) Power/Interaction Model, it was determined that legitimate, expert, and informational influences (powers) were used by this IEP team during the decision-making process, especially in exiting recommendations.

DEDICATION

To Patricia Louise, for believing in me

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I believe there are angels among us. Sent down to us from somewhere up above. They come to you and me in our darkest hour. To show us how to live, to teach us how to give. To guide us with a light of love (*Angels Among Us*, Alabama, 1994).

This journey has been an adventure. With highs, lows, and in-betweens, I could not have done this without the continual support of many angels that guided me through this process. I wish to first acknowledge Jesus Christ for the gifts, talents, and abilities that He has granted me to achieve this lifetime goal.

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I was inspired by The University of Iowa professor, Dr. Larry Bartlett, and his passion for special education students. Thank you, Dr. Bartlett for instilling upon me that same passion.

Special thanks go to each of the participants of this study; Mrs. Lisa Wunn as my transcriber; the many professionals with the Iowa Department of Education for assistance

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My love goes to my mother and father who believe in their children, especially me, their favorite! Well, dad, you got your way—I’m a DOCTOR!

The best for last, I am blessed by my children and wife. Cornelia and Nathanael, you two are my shining stars and you always bring a smile, laughter, and even tears of joy each time I think of you. May dad’s accomplishment provide encouragement for the two of you in following your dreams as well. Patricia this degree is as much yours as mine. Behind every good man is a GREAT woman! How true it is. Thank you for your editing, proofreading, insight, sacrifices, patience, and enduring love.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Millions of students throughout our public schools rely on educators to help them become productive and knowledgeable citizens. Their aspirations include being able to function appropriately in society and contribute to mankind. Within these millions of students are thousands of special education students who rely on these same educators to give them the identical opportunities and help them reach the same outcomes as those students in the general education classrooms. These students, like those of their peers, are dreaming the same dreams of becoming lawyers, doctors, and teachers. Whether it is through attending college or entering the workforce after high school, special education students deserve the same opportunities for their lives as those in general education.

In 1975, Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), was enacted to meet the educational needs of students with disabilities. Amendments to the EAHCA enacted in 1990, Public Law 101-476, changed the name of the Act to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Amendments to the IDEA added in 1997 further clarified, restructured, and extended the law (Yell, 1998). The guarantee of a free and appropriate education is extended to all children with disabilities under our federal laws of IDEA (1990, 1997, 2004). Given these rights and continual expectations to include special education students in the least restrictive environment, schools across America are under the gun of accountability. Not only must students with disabilities be afforded a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment, the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has created

sanctions and evoked educational discussions between politicians, school personnel, and community members in an attempt to see that student achievement scores reach higher and higher levels than ever before. On one hand, IDEA provides guarantees of an appropriate education for special education students, and on the other hand, NCLB demands high achievement scores, even for special education students. So where does that leave the special education student?

Gone are the days when schools are not accountable for their actions, including special education programs. At what point are special education students expected to become independent learners and return to the general education classroom? The implication of this is that educators need to change what they are doing if no child is to be left behind. In April of 1983, *A Nation at Risk Report* was released by the National Commission of Excellence in Education. This report stated, "The widespread public perception [is] that something is seriously remiss in our educational system" (p. 8). The report continued:

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves...all [students], regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. This promise means that all children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment, and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself. (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 8)

Although this researcher has only been an educator for the past 12 years, the implications of this study become clearer with each year while working in education and with each IEP meeting attended. Reintegration of level-one resource special education

students into the general education classroom must become a focus for IEP teams in special education programs.

Over the years, words such as “mainstreaming,” “inclusion,” and “reintegration” have emerged throughout the field of special education. While no federal or state law uses any of these terms, many educators and policy makers have used these words interchangeably. However, each of these terms has a difference in meaning.

“Mainstreaming” describes the process of transitioning students with disabilities from special education programs into a general education setting in order to address the requirement of least restricted environment mandated by law (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). “Inclusion” is the actual placement of students with disabilities into the general education setting. Powell-Smith and Ball (2002) state:

Inclusion generally is not a process geared toward eventual exit of the special education student, but rather attempts to reduce the segregation of students with disabilities regardless of the degree or severity of disability. Thus, inclusion decisions tend to be large-scale, values-based decisions (p. 542).

“Reintegration,” however, is the process of returning the special education student to the general education setting. This process is tied to a specific set of data-based decisions that is focused on exiting a student from special education altogether (Powell-Smith & Ball).

Many will agree that “mainstreaming” and “inclusion” of special education students to the least restrictive environment is important. However, this researcher would suggest that educators take a leap of faith to say that many level-one resource students have acquired the necessary skills to fully function in the general education classes without the tag of “special education” and need to be reintegrated into the general

education classroom. In all the various studies on special education, little has been written about the idea that many students are sheltered in special education programs instead of being reintegrated back into the general education classroom. This study focuses on the problem that the reintegration of level-one resource special education students rarely occurs in the high school setting.

Background of the Problem

This study will explore the idea of reintegration at the high school level; however, an understanding of special education, placement trends, and the theoretical framework may assist in understanding the dilemma of whether or not an IEP team would decide to exit a level-one resource special education student from special education programs. The following section explores the evolution of special education and the least restrictive environment initiatives, national and state placement data, and the theoretical framework of Raven's (1992) Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence.

Special Education

Special education programs historically had been separated from the general education classrooms. Students with special needs were removed from the general education classroom and taught by highly trained instructors in the area of special education (Kavale & Forness, 2000). The rights of special education students have been scrutinized and brought before the courts in an attempt to advocate for students with disabilities.

In *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1972), the state of Pennsylvania was found guilty of acting

unconstitutionally by not providing mentally retarded students a free public education. This ruling was later expanded in *Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia* (1972) to include all children with disabilities. In *Mills*, seven children were denied a publicly supported education with no provision for alternative educational placement, and the courts ruled that “lack of funds” was not a reason to deny students with disabilities a free public education.

Even though *PARC* (1972) and *Mills* (1972) were pivotal court cases which would later pave the way for policies regarding the education of students with special needs, a special education advocate challenged the idea of segregation of special education students since the 1960s. Dunn (1968) challenged this practice of separating special education students from the general education population and began the journey of “mainstreaming” a decade before *PARC* and *Mills* came about. Many critics argued the validity of Dunn’s approach to special education (i.e., least restrictive); however, Dunn continued to fight for special education reformation in American education.

Special interest groups emerged to defend special education students and fought for their right to be educated in the least restrictive environment. In 1964, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act was passed into law. This legislation prohibited discrimination on the basis of race. However, while attempts were made to eliminate discrimination against race, discrimination against those with disabilities seemed to have been ignored. Then in 1966, two years later, special interest groups persuaded Congress to approve the inclusion of Title VI into the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, Public Law 89-10. This law provided funding for programs for children with disabilities and was an attempt

to diminish discrimination practices among education. Yet, in 1967, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was again modified to include additional programs for children with disabilities, Public Law 90-247. A year later, in 1968, the Handicapped Children's Early Education Act authorized even more funding for early intervention programs and implementation of preschools (Drummond, 1997).

Various initiatives and policies have been devised to assist students with disabilities since the 1970's. However, in 1975, through the assistance of *PARC* (1972) and *Mills* (1972) and the efforts of advocates such as Dunn, the federal government enacted Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA). This law provided public education systems with administrative and financial provisions that would provide qualified students with disabilities: (a) nondiscriminatory testing, evaluation, and placement procedures; (b) education in the least restrictive environment (LRE); (c) procedural due process; and (d) a free and appropriate education (Yell, 1998).

Through the birth of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975, a path was paved for the education of special education students and provided services to see that these students would be provided an education similar to those of their non-disabled peers. Amendments were made to EAHAC in 1990 and became known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA, and then again in 1997, known as IDEA97, to continue the provisions of a "free and appropriate education." The current IDEA (2004) reemphasizes that special education students need to be educated in the least restrictive environment with parental involvement in all decisions regarding their child's education.

In addition to Public Law 94-142 and IDEA, many initiatives emerged over the past decade to provide more inclusive placements for students with special needs and to advocate for students to be educated in the least restrictive environment. One such initiative, the Regular Education Initiative (REI), surfacing in the late 1980's, called for a greater commitment to providing quality education, including access to general education curricula for students with disabilities (Handler, 2002). The REI was based on the following assumptions: (a) students are more alike than different, so truly "special" instruction is not required; (b) good teachers can teach all students; (c) all students can be provided with a quality education without reference to traditional special education categories; (d) general education classrooms can manage all students without any segregation; and (e) physically separate education was inherently discriminatory and inequitable (Kavale & Forness, 2000). In response to the REI, changes were made to the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) in 1990 and 1997 to further the right for an inclusive education for special education students and were also addressed within our current authorization of IDEA (2004).

As schools see that children with disabilities are given a free and appropriate education, they are also mandated to see that disabled students are also educated in the least restrictive environment. At some point, this could mean reintegration back into the general education classroom and would lead to an exit from special education programs. Both IDEA and REI initiatives provide schools the support needed to exit students from special education programs. In fact, the law mandates that special education students need to be exited back into the general education classroom when appropriate (IDEA,

1997, 2004). Each year IEP teams are required to determine if a student still qualifies for IDEA services and still requires special education services. As the number of students that are entering special education programs increases, IEP teams need to consider all placement opportunities and see that these placement decisions are aligned appropriately to the least restrictive environment.

Placement Decisions

In a sense, special education begins with the referral and evaluation process that may lead to the provision of services (Yell & Shriner, 1997). The law is clear that placement decisions must be made on an individual basis, a student's access to free and appropriate education must be considered when determining LRE, and a full continuum of services must be available when determining the LRE for an individual student (Hagan-Burke & Jefferson, 2002).

For the purpose of this inquiry, this researcher is concerned with the question: How does an IEP team determine that a student no longer requires special education services and can be successfully reintegrated (exited)? IDEA clearly states that students with disabilities should be removed from the general education environment "only when the nature and severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplemental aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily" (IDEA, 1997, p. 30). Once the student has been successfully mainstreamed into the general education classroom the IEP team must determine if that special education student has obtained the necessary skills needed to succeed independently in the general education classroom (reintegration) without special education services.

If schools are to make meaningful progress in providing appropriate educational experiences for students with disabilities, then it is reasonable to believe that a critical examination of two instructional practices must occur: (a) establishing IEP goals and objectives, and (b) monitoring progress toward those goals and objectives (Hagan-Burke & Jefferson, 2002). In addition to monitoring, an IEP team may need to consider exiting a child from special education once IEP goals have been achieved and the data shows that the student can succeed in the general education classroom without special education services. With the advancement of the General Education Intervention Program (GEI), educators across curricular departments will be held more accountable to provide accommodations within the general education classroom. Through inclusion strategies, many special education students will find themselves able and capable of succeeding academically outside of a special education program. Both IDEA and REI clearly suggest this expectation, yet many states throughout the nation have relatively low exiting (reintegration) rates of their special education students back into the general education classroom.

According to the Seventeenth Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (United States Department of Education, 1995), 4,786,065 students ages 6-21 nationally were provided services by IDEA during the 1993-1994 school year (a 4.2% increase over 1992-93). The Eighteenth Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (United States Department of Education, 1996) reported that only 60,094 students ages 14-21, or approximately 4%, of those that exited special education programs, were

reintegrated (exited) into the general education classroom during the 1993-1994 school year. The Eighteenth Annual Report also commented that “because this was the first year data were required on students returning to general education, the percentage reported as returning is expected to increase over the next few years” (p. 32).

In comparison, the Twenty-fourth Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disability Education Act (United States Department of Education, 2002) indicated that 562,744 students ages 14-21 nationwide were provided services by IDEA during the 1999-2000 school year. This report further showed that 67,286, or approximately 12%, of special education students ages 14-21 exited special education programs during the 1999-2000 school year (more recent statistics not available) and were reintegrated (exited) into the general education classroom. Statistically, there had been a 20.83% national increase in entrance percentages into special education programs over the past seven years, or an approximate 2.98% annual increase. Additionally, there had been an approximate 8% national increase in exit rates back into the general education classroom from 1993-1994 through 1999-2000 school years, or an approximate 1.14% annual increase. While entrance rates into special education continue to climb, exiting rates are also climbing. In addition, exiting into the general education classroom has consistently stayed at a 2 to 4% annual increase; making this researcher question the exiting practices among IEP teams.

On a state level, according to the Seventeenth Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (United States Department of Education, 1995), 56,740 students ages 6-21 were provided services in

Iowa by IDEA during the 1993-1994 school. The Eighteenth Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (United States Department of Education, 1996) reported that only 1,431, or approximately 2.52% of students ages 14-21 exited special education programs and were reintegrated (exited) into the general education classroom during the 1993-1994 school year.

The Twenty-fourth Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disability Education Act (United States Department of Education, 2002) reports that 66,881 students age 6-21 in Iowa were serviced by IDEA during the 2000-2001 school year. This report also indicated 861, or 14%, of special education students in Iowa ages 14-21 exited special education programs during the 1999-2000 school year (more recent statistics not available) and were reintegrated (exited) to the general education classroom. Statistically, there has been a 17.87% statewide increase in Iowa entrance percentages into special education programs over the past seven years, or approximately a 2.55% annual increase. In addition, there has been an 11.56% statewide increase in exit rates back into the general education classroom from 1993-1994 through 1999-2000 school years, or a 1.92% annual increase.

Additional data received from the Iowa Department of Education Bureau of Children, Family & Community Services (J. Lee, personal communication, September 22, 2003) confirmed that Iowa consistently has exited an approximate average of 14% of their special education students back into the general education classroom over the past reported five years (from the 1997-1998 school year through the 2001-2002 school year).

This study looked at the exiting rates of special education students prior to graduating and explored why these rates are low. What factors influence IEP team decisions to reintegrate special education students? Investigating these factors included using the theoretical framework of Raven's (1992) Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence.

Theoretical Framework

The use of power/influence by members on the IEP team may play an important role in the reintegration of special education students into the general education classroom. The focus of this inquiry is to explore those variables (social powers) used by IEP teams in exiting a special education student back into the general education classroom. Although many frameworks could be applied to the decision-making process of an IEP team, this researcher is interested in the use of power during this process and how that power influences decisions in regards to exiting students from special education programs. A popular approach in examining the use of power in decision-making is through the use of social powers defined by French and Raven (1959). Their typology of five social power bases include: coercive power, reward power, legitimate power, expert power, and referent power. Raven (1965) later modified this model by adding a sixth power base, informational. However, the implementation of social power was later refined once again by Raven's (1992) interaction model of interpersonal influence, more popularly known as the Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence. Raven's (1992) study explores the motivation and modes behind the power of the agent. Several studies have used French and Raven's (1959) original model to understand the

relationship between social power use and its effect on changing behavior (Klein, 1998). However, Raven's Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence has not been a theory applied to the relationship of IEP team members and the decisions they make in regard to exiting students from special education programs. An overview of French & Raven's (1959) bases is presented below:

Coercive Power. Coercive Power is based on the perception that the power holder can punish others for not conforming to the power holder's demands (French & Raven, 1959; Klein, 1998). Coercive Power involves Person A's ability to "manipulate" the attainment of valences (Matteson & Ivancevich, 1993). This power base is based on the perception that Person A can punish Person B if B does not comply or that A can coerce certain responses from B.

Reward Power. Reward Power is the perception that the power holder can administer positive valences and/or decrease negative valences for preferred behaviors (French & Raven, 1959). In other words, reward power is based on the ability to reward or provide positive reinforcement for a desired behavior. Reward Power is based on Person B's perception of Person A's ability and readiness to reward B somehow if B complies (Erchul & Raven, 1997). Rewards may be tangible, such as financial incentives, or intangible such as recognition or praise (Klein, 1998).

Legitimacy Power. Legitimacy Power is the perception that the source has the right to ask for compliance in a particular situation (French & Raven, 1959). Legitimate Power is rooted in B's obligation to accept A's influence attempt because B believes A

has a legitimate right to influence, perhaps because of A's position within the organization (Erchul & Raven, 1997).

Expert Power. Expert Power is the perception that the power holder has special knowledge or expertise in a given area (French & Raven, 1959). Expert Power is the belief that A has special knowledge or expertise in a given area over that of B (Erchul & Raven, 1997). In short, Person B will submit or allow Person A to make decisions due to Person B's perception of Person A's expertise in the given area.

Referent Power. Referent Power comes from the desire to identify with the power holder (French & Raven, 1959). Referent Power is A's potential to influence B based on B's identification with A, or desire for such identification (Erchul & Raven, 1997).

Informational Power. Informational Power is A's potential to influence B because of the judged relevance of the information contained in A's message (Erchul & Raven, 1997; Raven, 1965). With Informational Power, one makes decisions after coming to a conclusion with the input of another. The difference between Informational Power and Expert Power is that, with Expert Power, B makes a decision because A knows best. With Informational Power, B makes the decision after listening to A but makes the decision based on B's own knowledge of how to decide.

Raven's (1992) Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence further differentiates this model into six bases and 14 sub-bases of social power. Table 1 displays these differentiate.

Table 1

Bases of Social Power

Basis of Power	Further Differentiation
Coercion	Impersonal Coercion Personal Coercion
Reward	Impersonal Reward Personal Reward
Legitimacy	Formal Legitimacy (Position power) Legitimacy of Reciprocity Legitimacy of Equity Legitimacy of Dependence (Powerlessness)
Expert	Positive Expert Negative Expert
Reference	Positive Referent Negative Referent
Informational	Direct Information Indirect Information

By exploring Raven's (1992) Power/Interaction Model in the context of the decision-making processes of an IEP team, one may come to understand the influences involved in the reintegration of special education students. This model will serve as the guide for this study as the researcher explores various questions around the exiting practices of special education students into the general education classroom.

Background of the Researcher

Who am I?

I was an “oops,” as my mother puts it. Not planned, but a welcome addition to the family even though my mother already had two other children and she was only twenty-three years old. December 1968, a “medical wonder” was the doctor’s take. There were two embryo sacs, but only one baby, ME! I was one little, tiny, perfect complexioned baby, but with two, protruding, large intestines. One month into life and I was already written into the medical books. Something gone amiss with twins was one possibility, but the way my brother said it, “Kenny got hungry and ate the other one up!” Or simply put by my sister, “He’s just my baby brother!” My parents survived the odds of divorce. After 43 years, they are still happily married. The highest degree both of them obtained was a high school diploma. My father was a carpenter, a dry-waller to be exact, and my mother was a housewife most of her life with a few years of working in a factory. Both worked honestly and diligently to provide their children with the necessities, and luxuries, of life they did not get as children.

Growing up in southern California was wonderful. Opportunities abound, not to mention the wonderful weather. Yet, something within me was confined to the ideas and expectations of those around me. In high school, I was an “A” student for the most part. I was expected to become a lawyer, doctor, or business executive and before I knew it, high school was done. “Now what?” I wondered. Growing up, I thought I wanted to become a teacher or something working with kids. But as the end of high school neared,

I didn't know what I wanted to do. I had set goals for myself all my life, but somehow I neglected to set one for after high school. Before I knew it, high school was over and I had to step forward. I just didn't know what I was stepping toward.

So, I enrolled in a junior college close to home to satisfy my family and friends. Or was it an attempt to satisfy me? Either way, it really didn't matter. Three weeks into it, I quit college. I found the job of my dreams, so I thought. I was building airplanes on an assembly line. Eighteen years old, \$8.50 an hour (remember, this was the late 1980's), full medical, dental, and vision care. I was set, so I thought. However, there was still that side of me that wondered if I should be "educated." So, I enrolled into night classes at another community college so that I could do both--work and college. A month later, I quit college again. It just wasn't me, so I thought.

It was an early morning in February. I remember the day vividly. I was riding the bus into work, a brown paper lunch bag in one hand and my employee badge in the other. My 501 Levi straight-legged blue jeans showed various grease stains from wear at work. A blue and red flannel shirt and working boots completed the work attire. People of all different races and ages were sitting all around me, nobody saying a word. Everybody, in his or her daily routine of getting to work, sat there motionless, expressionless, and spiritless. "I'm meant to be something other than this," I thought to myself. I continued to ponder, "Is this me in ten, fifteen, twenty years? What have I done?" Seven months after I started, I quit my job. I woke up. I found myself. I wanted to become an educator. I picked up my journey where I had left it several years earlier. I was going after a career, a life! I knew what I wanted for my life, so I thought!

Moving to Iowa to pursue a degree in education became my goal. I had always wanted to show kids that learning could be fun. I wanted to help kids “find themselves.” I wanted to make a difference in today’s youth. Four years later, I graduated with a high school teaching degree in business education. After just a few interviews, I landed my first job. I was set, so I thought.

After eight years of teaching, I found myself wanting to impact more than just the kids. I saw youth needing more than I could give them as a classroom teacher and teachers struggling with ineffective leadership. Through self-evaluation and much conviction, I went back to school to become an administrator. As an administrator, I believed that I could impact youth and educators in a positive way. I could become that role model that I had needed as a student and that leader that I needed as an educator. I was set, so I thought.

Throughout my short years in education, I had accomplished professional achievements such as successful grant writing, publishing, and receiving teaching awards and honors. Yet, there was a world of information that I found myself still wanting to discover as an educator. How could educators be more effective? How could I impact kids today that would make a real difference for tomorrow? These questions, and thousands like them, literally pushed me toward furthering my education. In 2001, with much hesitation, I searched out a doctoral program that might be able to assist me in answering some of these life questions. A new job, a new baby, and starting a doctoral program were not a good idea. After one class, I talked myself out of it. I was to be content with where I was, so I thought.

A year later, I was sitting in a classroom working toward a doctorate degree at one of Iowa's universities. With two children under the age of three, I found myself wanting this doctorate more than ever before. I wanted to see that their education was meaningful and enriched. I was thankful that my whining to my wife the months prior to entering the doctoral program spurred on encouragement from her toward my obtaining yet another degree. Although she was extremely supportive throughout the doctoral process, when I was almost done with my classes and into the writing of this study, my wife declared, "I can't wait for you to complete your doctorate. You will finally be done with college." I could only smile as I thought, "So she thinks!"

Why the Study?

Although this researcher was not a special education student, this researcher struggled academically in reading and comprehension and was told many times that college would be a struggle. Statements such as, "Your English skills are atrocious, Kenny!" and "Kenny, You'll never make it in college with this type of writing!" were heard numerous times throughout middle school and high school. In fact, a conversation at the end of eighth grade with the counselor will forever impact this researcher's life:

Counselor: Kenny, I see here that you put down College Preparatory English for your ninth grade English course next year.

Kenny: That's correct. Is there anything wrong with that?

Counselor: Absolutely not. I think that it is great that you want to go to college. However, you are currently in our reading class and I don't think that it is wise for you to go straight to the college preparatory course. I think we need to put you into the high school reading course, or at the very most, the general English course. Your reading scores are not that great and we want to see that you succeed. Don't get me wrong, your scores are not that bad, but I

think continuing you in a reading class would be best for your first semester and then going to the next level at semester could be looked at depending on your success and progress is in the reading course. Is that alright?

Kenny: Uuhhh . . . I don't . . . No, it's not. I want to go to college. I have asked around and they say that it would be better for me to have four years of college prep English rather than reading and general English classes. I know my reading isn't the best, but I think I can handle it. I really need the classes to get into the college of my choice.

Counselor: I realize that, but I don't think that it is the best choice for you.

Kenny: Thank you, but as I understand it, I should be able to choose my classes, and I choose the college prep English class. Thanks.

Counselor: Alright, but please understand that I will put my recommendation down in writing and place it in your file.

Kenny: That's fine with me. I'm more determined now than I was before. Goodbye.

Counselor: Goodbye and good luck.

For a counselor to have the audacity to keep someone as determined as this researcher from succeeding in "regular" classes was unbelievable. Going through high school in the 1980's, most students who were determined to go to college were enrolled in college preparatory English courses throughout high school. So not being in college preparatory English courses would have been much like being in a "special education" classroom. While counselors at that time gave erroneous advice, this researcher is glad to have made the challenging decision to be in college preparatory classes. This researcher often wonders what would have happened if the decision was not made independently. What if the decisions had been influenced by the "expert powers" of this counselor? Would academic success have been reached if self-advocacy skills were not exercised?

As an educator today, is this researcher an active advocate for students' responsibility of self-determination? Would this researcher have obtained a Bachelor's degree? Would this researcher have obtained a Master's degree, or, dare say, be finishing a Doctoral degree?

As a person who struggled with speech and reading classes all through elementary and into junior high school, this researcher knows first hand what one can do when equipped with the techniques and self-advocacy skills to succeed in the general education classroom. Although not classified as a special education student, this researcher still believes that there are students that can and should be reintegrated (exited) from special education programs to experience success without the crutch of services that are no longer needed.

Statement of the Problem

Special education positions have been consistently designated as a critical shortage area in the United States (Caraway, 2002; NICHCY, 1998) due to the increase in special education students over the years. In the midst of overcrowded and understaffed special education programs, IDEA's free and appropriate education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment continues to mandate schools to make available the services needed for students to succeed (IDEA, 1997, 2004). Who then decides what an appropriate education is? Who decides what is considered the least restrictive environment? By law, the IEP team determines the need for special education and support services (Cantu, 2003). With the overcrowding of special education programs

and limited certified instructors, is it prudent for schools to continue servicing special education students who are primed for reintegration?

For years, research on special education has been focused on the initial placement of students into special education programs. Researchers have sought to identify those variables or cues that characterize students who are referred and placed into special education programs (Hensley, 1990). However, little research has been done on the other end of the decision-making process, termination of services. According to IDEA97, upon completion of the administration of tests and other evaluation materials, the IEP team shall make the determination of whether the student is a child with a disability. The team must also determine if the child requires special education services.

So then, how does an IEP team decide that a student no longer needs special education services? Are students currently being provided special education services when they rightfully should be exited? So what stops these decisions in exiting students from special education? One theory, Raven's (1992) Power/Interaction Model, could help to explain these decision-making processes that occur between and within IEP team members. IEP teams need to consider more often the choice of reintegrating students back into the general education classroom before high school graduation when these students possess the skills to succeed. Therefore, the focus of this study is guided by the following questions using the theoretical framework of Raven's Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence:

1. How do IEP teams determine if a child should exit from special education?

What, if any, exit criteria are used to determine if a child no longer requires special education services?

2. What are the various beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes that IEP teams adopt through the processes involved in exiting students from special education programs?

Significance of the Study

Determination of whether or not to reintegrate (exit) a high school student from a special education program into the general education classroom before graduation is the focus of this study. Data received from Iowa Department of Education Bureau of Children, Family and Community Services (J. Lee, personal communication, September 22, 2003) confirmed that Iowa consistently has exited an approximate average of 14% of their special education students back into the general education classroom over the past five years (from the 1997-1998 school year through the 2001-2002 school year). As indicated earlier, Iowa's entrance percentages are consistently at an approximate 17% annual increase, and yet, unfortunately, there is still as little as 14% (and consistently held at this rate over the past five years) of special education students exiting back into the general education classroom. Although a higher percentage of students exiting to the general education classroom occur in Iowa vs. national data, these figures still show alarming numbers of students entering special education in comparison to being staffed back into the general education classroom. Coupled with the unmet demands for special education instructors, it is imperative that exiting criteria be identified.

Because of the individualized nature of the LRE placement, there are no simple rules to guide IEP teams in making placement decisions (Yell, 1998). The least restrictive environment ensures that the education of the child is (a) with non-disabled peers to the maximum extent possible; (b) in the regular classroom environment with supplemental aids and services; (c) in the school your child would attend if non-disabled, unless otherwise required by the IEP team; and (d) integrated with non-disabled peers in non-academic, extracurricular services and activities throughout the day. According to IDEA, the general education setting with supplementary aides and services must be the primary placement consideration for eligible special education students (McCoy, 2002). In addition, students being considered for reintegration should be exited from special education because they are (a) no longer eligible as a student with a disability, and/or (b) no longer in need of specially designed instruction (IDEA, 1997).

So how should this be determined? Such decisions need to be in accordance with special education law and federal mandates. Data collected by the IEP team, rather than individual philosophies, should guide decisions about whether a student's reintegration in a general education classroom (or a student's exit from special education programs) will result in educational benefit and is the least restrictive environment. The standard for including students with disabilities in the general education setting is an "educational benefit" for the individual student (Hagan-Burke & Jefferson, 2002). When deciding reintegration of special education students, IEP teams will need to develop, monitor, and evaluate clear and measurable goals to assist them in the decision-making process.

Therefore, this study identified possible exiting criteria that an IEP team would use during their decision-making process in dismissing a student from their special education program. In addition, the beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions that this IEP team adopts through the decision-making process will be analyzed using the theoretical framework of Raven's (1992) Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence.

Delimitations

The researcher purposely chose the subjects for this study. An IEP team was selected from a public, 4-A, Iowa, rural school that was within a close proximity to my residence. The intention of this research study was to explore the decision-making process that IEP teams engage in when making a determination whether or not to exit a child from special education programs. This case study consisted of a multi-person IEP team and explored the factors and influences that impact the decisions that these individuals use to determine exiting decisions for special education students. This study was not intended to be generalized due to the size and scope of the study; however, readers will gain useful knowledge about the decision-making processes of this IEP team, in particular about exiting students from special education programs before they graduate from high school. In addition, readers will also gain understanding of what factors and influence impact these IEP team members during their decision-making process.

The researcher was the only interviewer and primary instrument for data collection. The researcher was also an observer of an IEP meeting which served as a secondary source of data. As a current administrator in a public, 1-A, Iowa, rural school,

the researcher realized that his own perceptions, feelings, and judgments impacted this study by bringing his own feelings and prejudices to the reporting of his findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Merriam, 1998). However, thick description was sought from this IEP team to give a clear perspective of their individual views of how and why they make decisions about exiting special education students before they graduate from high school.

Summary

Various researchers have studied placement of students into special education programs over the years. IDEA (1990, 1997, 2004) clearly delineates the process at which students may obtain special education services. However, knowing how and why these students are exited back into the general education classroom has recently become an important question for educators and lawmakers alike. This study will look at the criteria used by an IEP team in making decisions regarding reintegration (exiting) of special education students back into the general education classroom. In addition, this study will explore the factors that influence exiting decisions utilizing the theoretical framework of Raven's (1992) Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence.

Definitions

Accommodations: Supports or services provided to help a student access the general curriculum and validly demonstrated learning (Michaelson, 2005).

Area Education Agency (AEA): An intermediate educational unit created by Iowa Code, Chapter 273 (Iowa Department of Education, 2000).

Child Find: The state must assure that all students with a disability, from birth to 21, residing in the state who are in need of special education and related services or are

suspected of having disabilities and in need of special education are identified, located, and evaluated. These requirements include children with disabilities attending private schools (IDEA Regulations, 1992).

Children Requiring Special Education: Those individuals handicapped in obtaining an education as specified in Iowa Code Chapter 256B, as defined in the Iowa Administrative Rules of Special Education and referred to as an entitled individual (Iowa Department of Education, 2000).

Children Who are Handicapped in Obtaining an Education: Individuals with disabilities who are unable to receive educational benefit from the general education experience without the provision of special education and related services as defined in the Iowa Administrative Rules of Special Education. In these rules, they are referred to as an eligible individual (Iowa Department of Education, 2000).

Consent: Permission is granted by signee to participate in an activity. In some cases, parent permission (consent) is given for their child to participate in the activity (Michaelson, 2005).

Disability: A physical, sensory, cognitive or affective impairment that causes the student to need special education services (Rogers, 2004).

Eligible Individual: An individual with a disability who is handicapped in obtaining an education and who is entitled to receive special education and related services. The term includes an individual who is over 6 and under 16 years of age who, pursuant to the statutes of this state, is required to receive a public education; an individual under 6 or over 16 years of age who, pursuant to the statutes of this state, is

entitled to receive a public education; and an individual between the ages of 21 and 24 who, pursuant to the statutes of this state, is entitled to receive special education and related serves (Iowa Department of Education, 2000).

Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE): IDEA requires that a state has policies that assure all students with disabilities the right to a free and appropriate education. FAPE requirements have both procedural and substantive components. These protections ensure the parents' right to meaningful participation in all decisions affecting their child's education. In addition, FAPE consists of special education and related services that are to be provided to students with disabilities (Yell, 1998).

General Education Intervention (GEI): Attempts to resolve presenting problems or behaviors of concern in the general education environment prior to conducting a full and individual evaluation as described in sub rule 41.48(2) (Iowa Department of Education, 2000).

Inclusion: A popular philosophical position based upon the belief that we need to return to one educational system for all students and that every student is entitled to an instructional program which meets his or her individual needs and learning characteristics. Does not imply the special education services are eliminated, just transferred to the general education setting (Rogers, 2004).

Individualized Education Program (IEP): The written record of an eligible individual's special education and related services. The IEP document records the decisions reached at the IEP meeting and sets forth in writing a commitment of resources necessary to enable an eligible individual to receive needed special education and related

services appropriate to the individual's special learning needs (Iowa Department of Education, 2000).

Individual Education Program (IEP) Meeting: A meeting that occurs at least once annually. The student's present level of functioning is discussed, progress made since the last meeting is reviewed, and goals and objectives are established for the next year. Every third year, the IEP planning group will conduct a review of the student's status based on appropriate reevaluation data (Sitlington, Clark, & Kolstoe, 2000).

Individual Education Program (IEP) Team: A group of individuals responsible for developing, reviewing or revising an IEP for an eligible individual (Iowa Department of Education, 2000).

Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA): Enacted by congress in 1990 as an amendment to P.L. 94-142, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975. Amended again in 1997 and 2004 (Michaelson, 2005).

Learning Disability: A disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia (Iowa Department of Education, 2000).

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE): Including individuals requiring special education in general education classes and activities to the maximum extent appropriate. Special classes separate schooling or removal of individuals requiring special education

from the general education environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the individual's disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of accommodations and modifications cannot be satisfactorily achieved (IDEA, 1997).

Mainstreaming: This term does not actually appear in law. It refers to IDEA's preference for the education of every child in the least restrictive environment for each student and has been most widely used to refer to the return of children with mild disabilities to a regular classroom for a portion of each school day (Rogers, 2004).

Modifications: Changes made to the content and performance expectations for students (Michaelson, 2005).

Parent: A natural or adoptive parent, a guardian or a surrogate parent who has been appointed in accordance with the Iowa Administrative Rules of Special Education. The term does not include the state if the child is a ward of the state. The term includes persons acting in the place of a parent, such as a grandparent or stepparent with whom an individual lives, as well as persons who are legally responsible for an individual's welfare. A foster parent may act as a parent under the Iowa Administrative Rules of Special Education if the natural parent's authority to make an educational decision on the individual's behalf has been extinguished under state law; and the foster parent has an ongoing, long-term parental relationship with the child, is willing to make the educational decisions required of parents and no interest that would conflict with the interests of the individual (Iowa Department of Education, 2000).

Placement: The setting in which the special education service is delivered to the student. It must be derived from the student's IEP (Rogers, 2004).

Post-Secondary Education: Any education program beyond high school that has an academic, vocational, professional, or pre-professional focus is considered post-secondary education (Sitlington, Clark, & Kolstoe, 2000).

Procedural Safeguards: IDEA's extensive system of safeguards to ensure that parents are equal participants in the special education process. These safeguards consist of four components: general safeguards, the independent educational evaluation, the appointment of surrogate parents, and dispute resolution (IDEA Regulations, 1992).

REI (Regular Education Initiative): A concept promoted by former Assistant Secretary of Education Madeline Will. The goal of the REI is to merge the special education and regular education systems into a unitary system (Rogers, 2004).

Related Services: Transportation and such developmental, corrective and other services as are required to assist an individual with a disability to benefit from special education (Iowa Department of Education, 2000).

Reliability: Consistency between the data you collect and report and the empirical world you are studying. Refers more to the accuracy of the researcher's description of the research site and subjects than with his or her interpretation of what the findings mean or how they relate to other research and theory (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

Reintegration: Process involving determination of when it is appropriate to fade and eventually remove special education services for a student (Powell-Smith & Ball, 2002).

Roster Teacher: Used by participants of this study referring to the special education instructor.

Special Education: Specially designed instruction, at no charge to the parents or guardians, to meet the unique needs of an eligible individual (Iowa Department of Education, 2000).

Transition Services: A coordinated set of activities for a student with a disability that is designed with an outcome-oriented process that promotes movement from one setting to another (Iowa Department of Education, 2000).

Triangulation: Used in many different ways but usually refers to the use of multi-data sources or theoretical perspectives in a study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

Validity: In testing, the appropriateness, meaningfulness, and usefulness of specific inferences made from test scores (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003).

Vocational Education: Organized educational programs that are directly related to the preparation of individuals for paid or unpaid employment or for additional preparation for a career requiring other than a baccalaureate or advanced degree (Iowa Department of Education, 2000).

Zero Reject- All students with disabilities eligible for services under IDEA are entitled to a free appropriate public education. This principle applies regardless of the severity of the disability (Yell, 1998).

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

The purpose of this study was to examine the process and criteria of exiting special education students back into the general education classroom prior to graduation. The researcher is concerned with the rising amount of students identified for special education services K-12 compared to the low number of students being exited prior to graduation. This study focused on two questions:

1. How do IEP teams determine if a child should exit from special education and what, if any, exit criteria are used to determine if a child no longer requires special education services?

2. What are the various beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes that IEP teams adopt through the processes involved in exiting students from special education programs?

Both quantitative and qualitative research methods could be used in this inquiry; however, based on the research questions and the desire to understand in great detail the processes that occur between IEP team members in their decision-making processes, a qualitative method appeared to be more appropriate (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

Qualitative research, broadly defined, means "any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 17). While quantitative and qualitative methods could both be used to conduct this study, this researcher chose qualitative methods to provide a natural and personal view of the perception, attitudes, and beliefs of

those being researched. Simply stated by Bogdan and Biklen (2003), “If you want to know about the process of change in a school and how the various school members experience change, qualitative methods will do a better job” (p. 38) of discovering these changes than quantitative methods. Indeed, it was the researcher’s desire to do exactly that, to understand fully the process of change in a special education student’s placement by the IEP team. Therefore, qualitative methods were used for this study. Qualitative methods enabled the researcher to engage in an in-depth study of instances of a phenomenon in its natural context and from the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomenon (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003).

Qualitative Research

Qualitative considerations are taken into account in composing sonnets, songs, and scenarios. They are employed in teaching, in leading armies, and in constructing theories. Qualitative considerations are used in telling a story and in making love, in sustaining a friendship and in selling a car. In short, qualitative thought is ubiquitous in human affairs. It is not some exotic form of doing or making, but a pervasive aspect of daily life. For that reason and for others it is useful. (Eisner, 1991, p. 5)

Even though qualitative methods have been used for years, it was not until the 1960’s that the term “qualitative research” was even used (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Many terms have since emerged in the research field and have become more or less synonymous with qualitative research including: naturalistic, interpretive, and ethnographic—to name a few. However, qualitative research goes beyond just a simple definition. In fact, qualitative research is often misunderstood and confused with other forms of inquiry, such as quantitative. Qualitative studies are about talking, visiting, interacting,

responding, participating, and living the experiences (Bogdan & Biklen; Eisner, 2003).

Denzin and Lincoln (2003) say the following about qualitative research:

Qualitative research is multi-method in its focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 2)

Some forty years later, qualitative research is more prevalent than quantitative research in many research fields and is becoming increasingly recognized by researchers, especially in the field of education. As people interact with various phenomena, humans so deeply want to understand this thing we call life. In an attempt to gain meaning from everyday life, qualitative methods are often drawn upon more than from quantitative methods. Looking into qualitative research, readers need to keep in mind the following common characteristics: (a) naturalistic setting, (b) descriptive output, (c) concern with processes, (d) inductive data analysis, and (e) search for deep meaning (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

Qualitative researchers spend time in the natural setting that is being studied. It is in this natural setting that the researcher collects “descriptive” data in forms of words, pictures, and emotions versus reducing the data to a numeric form. While searching for answers about the process, outcomes are not always as important to the qualitative researcher. In contrast to the traditional approach of quantitative research, qualitative will sometimes avoid hypotheses to test or specific questions to answer. Instead, qualitative researchers attempt to experience an event in time and to develop a deep

understanding and appreciation of this event to the extent can be grasped and reported (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

Pilot Study

The literature says that a good study will have had a prior pilot study conducted (Gall et al., 2003; Stake, 1995). Therefore, a pilot study was conducted two months prior to this study. The pilot study consisted of interviews of an IEP team from a rural, small (1A), public high school. The IEP team consisted of the following members: (a) school administrator, (b) a special education instructor, (c) a general education instructor, (d) a parent, and (e) an area education agency representative. The IEP team selected was of a student identified as a level-one resource student. This IEP team was randomly selected among all the level-one resource students in the school's department with the understanding that the student had probable means of exiting prior to graduation.

Eisner (1991) points out that a qualitative interview should not be formal, rigid, or mechanical in method. A guided conversational approach (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) was used for the interviews with occasional prompting when needed. Each member of this IEP team was interviewed separately, with the duration ranging from 45 minutes to one hour in length. In addition, emails and phone conversations were used to answer additional questions resulting from the analysis of the transcriptions. Interviews were conducted at a site designated by the IEP team member (three were conducted at the school and one at the member's home).

The results of the pilot study included various decision-making themes that IEP members use when deciding whether or not to exit a child from special education

services. These themes included the use of power by IEP team members. Those types of power discovered to be used in the pilot study included: (a) expert, (b) legitimate, (c) reference, and (d) informational powers as defined by Raven's (1992) Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence and led to the conceptual framework for this study.

Site Selection

The focus of this study was the decision-making process involved when exiting a child from special education services. To gain knowledge in this area, the researcher purposefully selected a 4A, public, high school in Iowa. The selection of the site was made based on a multiple criteria. First, a site was chosen that was larger than the one from the pilot study. The pilot school was a 1A school, the smallest size for an Iowa school, whereas this study was done in a 4A school, the largest size for an Iowa school. Understanding that this study can not be generalized, the researcher was still interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the exiting process that IEP teams engage in and the researcher desired to see the similarities and differences found between the pilot and the main research study.

Secondly, the proximity of the school chosen offered the researcher a better opportunity to actively conduct observations, interviews, and contact those in the study. The distance between the researcher's residence and the study's site did not stop any needs that arose, such as last minute accommodations, follow-up communications, and/or scheduling appointments for interviews.

The researcher was also interested in knowing if the various services available to this site impacted the study. Larger Iowa educational systems lend themselves to more

available services for their special education programs than smaller school systems. Thus, the use of these services could have emerged as a theme from the study when compared to the pilot study. While qualitative research does not seek to generalize findings, conducting in-depth interviews with IEP team members at size-diverse schools enabled the researcher to more broadly understand the complexities of exiting special education students prior to graduation.

Gaining Entry

Prior to contacting the school, application for permission to conduct this study was made through the University of Northern Iowa's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

The application made the following proposal:

This research is important because the researcher is studying what IEP teams view as important factors in determination of exiting students from special education programs. Primary purpose is to expand the knowledge of the IEP decision-making process in special education.

The study is designed to consist of one-on-one interviewing at a site mutually agreed upon by the researcher and participant from approximately one hour per session for up to three sessions. During these times, participants will be given open-ended questions about decision-making processes that they do on IEP teams. They will only need to answer questions that they are comfortable with. It is possible that they may be contacted by electronic mail or phone for follow-up questions as the study progresses.

The benefits for society will include an in-depth review of an IEP team's decision-making regarding exiting students into the general education classroom. This benefit will assist society in understanding what characteristics are needed to return students back into the general education classroom after being placed into a special education program. In addition, through research and collaboration with educational professionals, additional studies can be done to determine if characteristics identify are valid characteristics for exiting students from special education back into the general education classroom before they graduate from high school.

Once approval was given by the University of Northern Iowa's IRB, an AEA staff member, who is also a colleague of the researcher and recent doctoral student, was contacted by telephone to assist with gaining entry into a 4A, suburban, Iowa high school. The researcher was then connected with the school's special education director who acted as a liaison between school personnel and the researcher. The special education director was asked to find a special education teacher that worked with level-one resource students. These students were purposively identified for this study due to the higher probability of level-one resource students being eligible to be reintegrated (exited) back into the general education classroom. The special education director randomly selected a special education instructor who worked with level-one resource students from all the special education level one instructors within that school's department.

Communication with the special education instructor via email and phone was then made by the researcher. Through various emails and phone calls, the researcher began to develop a working relationship with the special education instructor and provided the guidelines for the IEP team to be studied: One that is working with a level one (mildly disabled) student that may have the possibility of exiting prior to graduation. The special education instructor and the researcher then identified an IEP team to study and the special education instructor solicited their participation on the researcher's behalf. Once the team was identified and willing to participate, observation of an IEP meeting and interviews were scheduled.

Participant Selection

Once the special education instructor was randomly selected from all instructors that work with level-one resource students, his assistance was used in selecting a single IEP team of a level one resource high school student from his roster. A level-one resource student was targeted due to the likelihood of exiting prior to graduation over a moderate or severely disabled student. Again, a level level-one resource student was explicitly targeted for this study due to a greater possibility for exiting than other levels of special education students. According to national and state statistics, mildly disabled students are more likely to exit back into the general education classroom prior to graduation than those with more severe disabilities (United States Department of Education, 2002). Participants for this study were solicited from the special education instructor from all IEP teams that worked with level-one resource students. The IEP team accepting our invitation and selected for this study was currently working with a student who could potentially be exited before she graduates. Observations and interviews were conducted with all members of this student's IEP team, including the high school student and parent. The IEP team's demographics are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3

IEP Team Demographics

Pseudonym	Position on IEP Team	Educational Experience	Highest Degree Obtained	Field of Study
Sarah	Student	N/A	No Degree	N/A
Linda	Parent	None	Associate of Arts Degree (Nursing)	Nursing
Val	General Education Instructor	12 years as classroom teacher	MA (Administration)	Language Arts, Theatre, Speech, Reading, Curriculum
Dale	Special Education Instructor	10 years as a special education instructor, 6 years as a HS administrator	MA (Administration)	Agriculture, Special Education, Psychology, Higher Education, Administration
Larry	Administrator	21 as a special education instructor, 5 as an administrator	MA (Administration)	Special Education, Administration
Scott	School Psychologist	12 years as a school psychologist	MA (School Psychology)	Psychology

Data Collection

Hatch (2002) states, “interviews are used to uncover the meaning that participants use to organize their experiences and make sense of their worlds” (p. 91). A guided conversational approach was used to gather data for this study. The data collection stage encouraged open and friendly conversations between the researcher and the participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Gall et al., 2003; Hatch). As the story was retold from the perspective of the participants, Spradley’s (1979) comment became ever-so-more meaningful:

By word and by action, in subtle ways and in direct statements, [researchers] say, “I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you would explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand?” (p. 34).

A series of initial questions were developed to guide the conversations with further questioning evolving from this open-ended dialog.

Interview Questions

Initial questions included the following:

- Describe your educational experience(s).
- Describe a typical IEP meeting.
- What decisions does the IEP team make?
- How are decisions made by the IEP team members?
- What is the role of the IEP team?
- What is the role of each member on the IEP team?

- How is an IEP developed?
- Who initiates change in an IEP and why?
- How is consensus reached?
- Are decisions to stop special education services for certain students ever made?
- How do you determine if a special education student should be exited?
- Describe a student for whom a decision to exit special education were made?
- Under what circumstances do you believe students should be exited from special education services?
- Do you think that there are students in special education programs that should have been exited and why or why not?
- Are some voices of IEP team members more influential than others? Why or why not?

Asking questions and getting answers is a much harder task than it may seem at first. The spoken or written word has always a residue of ambiguity, no matter how carefully we word the questions and how carefully we report or code the answers. Yet interviewing is one of the most common and powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow human beings. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, pp. 61-62)

The above questions assisted in initiating the interviews and provided a safety net to return to when needed. However, the interviews often went beyond these initial questions, allowing the participants to fully express their meanings, perceptions, and beliefs. The dialogs within these interviews were natural and conversational in nature. Probing and follow up questions were conducted throughout the interviews. Answers to

questions were continuously sought until the researcher believed that everything needing to be said was conveyed (Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

Interviews

Interviews were conducted on site because of the comfort level and ease it provided the participants. Interviews were recorded by the researcher using a General Electric desktop, personal, portable cassette-recorder player. Interviews on cassette tapes were then given to a third party to transcribe using a Panasonic standard RR-830 cassette transcriber.

The majority of the interviews were conducted in a conference room on site in the counseling center. This conference room was intimate, comfortable, and provided both the participant and the researcher a relaxing environment in which to engage in friendly conversations about themselves, the student, and IEP decision-making practices. Three interviews were conducted in classrooms (two in the special educator's classroom and one in the general educator's classroom). In addition, all interviews with the associate principal were conducted in his office. The classroom environments provided a little less intimacy due to the size of the rooms, distractions from students passing in the hallways outside the room, and an occasional drop-in by a colleague or student; however, interviews in the classrooms provided the special educator and general education instructor with a level of confidence that otherwise may not have been achieved in the conference room. The associate principal's office was the most distracting, had continuous interruptions and the discussion lacked genuine dialogue. Interviews conducted with the associate principal were often interrupted with telephone calls,

messages from his secretary, and the agenda awaiting him on his desk for when our interview was concluded.

Each participant was interviewed three separate times with the exception of the parent. The parent was only interviewed one time. After multiple attempts to gain additional interviews, it was decided by the researcher to forgo pursuing the parent for participation. Through the refusal to respond to the numerous messages and appeals to conduct a second interview, it was quite apparent that the parent no longer wanted to participate in the rest of the study.

Each interview ranged between 60-90 minutes in length. Each consecutive interview assisted in answering follow up questions that emerged from the data analysis of the previous interview and provided additional data of the decision-making process in which this IEP team engaged. After reviewing transcriptions of the previous interview, additional questions emerged. Interviews were open-ended and conversational to allow participants to expand beyond initial questions being asked. However, a set of initial questions were used to keep the dialogue progressing and to provide the research the ability to redirect conversations back to the focus of the study. Throughout the continuous analysis of the transcripts, data provided relevant questions for further investigation at subsequent interviews. Interviews were concluded when interviews began to provide little or no additional information regarding the decision-making process during an IEP meeting.

Transcriptions of all interviews were personally reviewed for accuracy and coherence by the researcher. Transcription of the interviews was concluded within one

week of each interview to allow the researcher to immediately review, reflect, and analyze comments received from participants. Transcripts were read and re-read multiple times by the researcher for reflection and to provide opportunities to create more field notes for future data analysis.

The confidentiality of the study was conveyed to the participants during each interview and throughout the data collection process. This was done to ensure the participants their anonymity. In addition, participant consent forms were reviewed and signed by both participant and researcher before the observations were conducted.

First interview. The first interview was initially set up to gain background information on the participants. However, after interviewing the general education instructor and the special education instructor, all other participants were guided straight from background information into their experiences as a member on an IEP team in the first interview session. The background information was obtained to assist the researcher in gaining a better understanding of each participant on the IEP team. Background information was used to enrich the study and provide the reader “thick description.”

Second interview. Interview two was primarily used to gain insight into the role that each participant plays on the IEP team. The decision-making process, criteria for entering and exiting special education, and personal opinions regarding the exiting of students from special education programs dominated the discussions held during the second interview. In addition, clarifications of answers, expansion of answers, and follow-up questions from the first interview were also conducted. The goal of the second interview was to fully explore the first research question: How do IEP teams determine if

a child should exit from special education? What, if any, exit criteria are used to determine if a child no longer requires special education services?

Third interview. The third and final interview clarified beliefs and perceptions as to the exiting criteria used in exiting students from special education. The conceptual framework of Raven's (1992) Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence guided much of the questioning during this final stage. It was the researcher's desire to investigate the power(s) that participants use when making decisions regarding exiting practices on IEP teams. Thus, this interview strongly coincided with the second research question: What are the various beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes that IEP teams adopt through the processes involved in exiting students from special education programs? In addition, closing comments were taken by each participant for their opportunity to summarize their thoughts and beliefs regarding the practice of exiting students from special education programs.

Telephone conversations. Some additional questions and comments were obtained from the special education instructor by phone. Due to the distance between the site and the researcher's residence, telephone conversations provided an inexpensive way to gather additional insight on a few questions that emerged from the analysis of the data. Also, discussions as to the difficulty that was experienced trying to conduct additional interviews with the parent were held by telephone. Telephone conversations pertaining to this study occurred several times between November 2004 and October 2005.

Email correspondence. In addition to telephone, email was used to assist in communication between the researcher and two of the participants (special education

instructor and the associate principal). Communications with the associate principal were used to confirm interview times. One of the interviews with the associate principal occurred on a separate day than those with the other participants. Communications with the special education instructor via email were done to confirm interview times, conference room reservations, and information involving the resistance from the parent to further participate in this study.

Participant Observation

During this study, an observation of the student's IEP meeting was conducted. Pearsall (1970) identifies four theoretically possible roles that researchers may participate in: (a) complete observer, (b) observer as participant, (c) participant as observer, and (d) complete participant. Each role has its advantages and disadvantages, so the researcher must select a role in accordance with the nature of his study.

For this study, the role of complete observer was chosen in an attempt to record and study this IEP team in its natural setting. Participants were observed while interacting with their environment, engaging in an IEP meeting, and in informal settings (Merriam, 1998; Pearsall, 1970). Although one can argue that the mere presence of the researcher at an IEP meeting made him a participant, the researcher's role as a complete observer was explicitly communicated to the participants through the consent form and personal communication from the special education instructor at the beginning of the IEP meeting (Adler & Adler, 1994). In addition, special education laws that surround the makeup of an IEP team also made the researcher's official participation on this team impossible, as the researcher does not serve the student in an academic capacity (IDEA,

1997). Furthermore, an observation was conducted of this student's annual IEP meeting to observe the IEP team members interact, gain understanding of the student's disabilities and IEP goals, and to study how each member participates within the decision-making process.

Field Notes

Field notes from observations were taken using the old fashioned method of pencil and paper and were taken throughout the observation. Additional thoughts, questions, and perceptions from the researcher that pertained to the observation were recorded in a handheld recorder that was used in the car while traveling. These data were then immediately transcribed into a word document the evening of the observation. Within a week following the observation, field notes were also transcribed and expanded into a word processing document for coding and analysis according to underlying themes and patterns. This process was conducted in order to create an accurate and complete description of the accounts observed from the IEP meeting. Field notes and researcher notes were analyzed to provide detailed (thick) description of the participants, their interactions, and the setting in which they worked (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

Data Analysis

"Rigor in qualitative research derives from the researcher's presence, the nature of the interaction between researcher and participants, the triangulation of data, and interpretations of perceptions, and rich, thick description" (Merriam, 1998, p. 50). Or simply put by Hatch (2002), "Data analysis is a systematic search for meaning. It is a way to process qualitative data so that what has been learned can be communicated to

others” (p. 148). Data was analyzed through examining constructs, themes, and patterns from the transcription of recorded interviews and field notes. Categories and encoding based on recurring themes, patterns, and topics were entered into a word processing document (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Coding of Data

In this study, interview data were tape recorded and given to a third party to transcribe into a Word document immediately following the interviews. Observation notes, field notes, and reflective thoughts from the researcher were transcribed within a week’s time after collected; however, transcription was completed by the researcher himself. Transcribing data in a timely fashion provided the researcher opportunities to review the data and develop further questions that were used in upcoming interviews with participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Coding is reading the data while searching for information that can be put into categories because of their relationship to each other (Hatch, 2002). Coding is the process of taking the data from its raw form and clustering commonalities among the data. Appendixes A, B, and C show the schemes developed through this coding process. Codes were critically examined by the researcher and chair to provide a detailed picture of the phenomena being studied. While codes may have been created, reworded, tossed aside, and occasionally brought back to the study, the collection of data was progressive throughout this study and involved continuous revamping of the categories to ensure appropriate coding. Emerging themes, categories, and relationships came as a result of this critical examination of the data. With each

interview, codes were solidified from the incoming data collection. In addition, allowances for new codes were present as further data were collected.

Analysis of Participant Data

Whole-text analysis was the method used to analyze the data collected for this study. Whole-text analysis is the process of examining portions of text through assigning codes. "Coding is the heart and soul of whole-text analysis. Through the process of coding data, the researcher is then forced to make judgment about the meanings of contiguous blocks of text" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 274). Because whole-text analysis forces the researcher into making judgments about the meanings of text, data collected through interview transcripts, observations field notes, and reflection logs were coded according to emerging subcategories, categories, and themes (Denzin & Lincoln). Analysis involved a process of working with concepts. These concepts would be coded and recoded multiple times over while at the same time synthesizing them to determine patterns and themes to be discovered (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The research questions and the conceptual framework were used to guide this study throughout the analysis stage of this study.

Once every participant completed the first round of interviews, coding began. A three tier coding scheme was used to assist with the organization of thoughts, data, and analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Tier one coding consisted of taking the raw data and organizing the data into broad, unrelated, topics (Appendix A). To accomplish this, interview transcriptions, observation field notes, and reflection logs were printed triple spaced from a word processing document and physically cut into sections (slips) and

placed upon a table top. Each slip of paper was then moved about on a table top, grouped together if ideas were interrelated, and coded accordingly. Throughout this process, the piles were often added to and subtracted from due to rewording of codes or reassigning of codes. At times, some codes would be merged to represent a completely different code that was determined to be more appropriate. Through this inductive process, codes were collectively created to express the intent of the participants. The data from each interview was assigned a new code or a code from the already established list of codes. This process was completed for each interview until all interview data was coded. The data were arranged, rearranged, merged, extracted, and even brought back into the study multiple times throughout the coding phase. During this process, themes, patterns, and ideas would surface for further examination.

While tier one focused on assigning topics to the data, tier two coding resulted in the emergence of subcategories and categories (Appendix B). Data were continuously analyzed so that coding was coherent and subcategories and categories were appropriately represented. The subcategories emerged through the critical examination of the codes. As subsequent interviews were conducted, transcript data were further analyzed to determine the relationship to patterns and themes that emerged. Once subcategories were created, categories were formed through grouping similar subcategories together. This process continued throughout the coding phase the study. Categories and subcategories were often altered, disseminated, reassigned, or eliminated all together until the meaning of the participants was captured.

Tier three coding was completed by contrasting and comparing the categories and subcategories to the conceptual framework and the research questions. The conceptual framework used for this study was Raven's (1992) Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence. Again, the two research questions for this study included:

1. How do IEP teams determine if a child should exit from special education?

What, if any, exit criteria are used to determine if a child no longer requires special education services?

2. What are the various beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes that IEP teams adopt through the processes involved in exiting students from special education programs?

Using the research questions to guide this process, coherent themes emerged (Appendix C). Themes that emerged in the study were reviewed and evaluated multiple times to ensure alignment to the research questions that guided this study. Collaboration with the committee chair was conducted on multiple accounts for clarification, guidance, interpretation, and validation of data collected.

As the analysis process evolved, it became apparent that the conceptual framework would not be used in the analysis of the first question in this research: How do IEP teams determine if a child should exit from special education? What, if any, criteria are used to determine if a child no longer requires special education services? The decision not to use the conceptual framework as the lens for the first question was made by my chair and the researcher because the use of influence rarely was perceived as a factor in answering this question. Responses to how determination was made and what criteria were used seldom indicated the use of influences from participants and therefore,

using Raven's (1992) model became futile and an unsuitable lens for answering this first question. Through the examination of the data collected and analyzing it through the lens of the first research question, the following themes surfaced: (a) student is meeting IEP goals, (b) student can advocate for themselves, (c) adequacy of the general education classroom, (d) alternative setting for post-secondary placement, and (e) change is undesirable by student.

The conceptual framework, Raven's (1992) Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence, was used for the analysis of the second question. Again, this question was: What are the various beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes that IEP teams adopt through the processes involved in exiting students from special education programs? To begin this phase, all data were realigned to the power bases of Raven's Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence. Again, data sections (slips) from the transcripts, field notes, and reflection logs were realigned according to their relationship to the six power basis described by French & Raven (1959) and Raven (1965): (a) coercion, (b) reward, (c) legitimacy, (d) expert, (e) reference, and (f) informational. Data were repeatedly examined through this lens with the data being arranged, and rearranged from one power base to another until the researcher felt the data were correctly reflecting the power bases being used by the participants of this study. From this data analysis, the following influences (powers) emerged as being used by IEP teams and guided the rest of this research study: (a) legitimate power, (b) expert power, and (c) informational power.

As stated earlier, the framework for this study was not a suitable lens for evaluating the first research question given that this team does not use standard criteria

for exiting practices. However, the conceptual framework was a wonderful lens for examining the perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes that IEP team members develop during the decision-making process, especially in exiting students from special education programs. The data collected in this study, supported the use of this conceptual framework and provided a better understanding of the influences used during decision-making practices that this IEP team engaged in.

Validity and Reliability

According to Auerbach and Silverstein (2003), subjectivity and interpretation is often excluded from quantitative studies. However, qualitative researchers believe that subjectivity, interpretation and context are inevitably interwoven into every research project (Auerbach & Silverstein). Credibility and trustworthiness of this study are shown through the following criteria that were used in this study: usefulness, contextual completeness, transparency and communicability, and peer debriefing (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005; Auerbach & Silverstein).

Bogdan and Biklen (2003) say usefulness is obtained when the reader is enlightened. This study, in the opinion of the researcher, does just that—enlightens educators to the reasons behind minimal exiting recommendations from IEP team members for level-one resource special education students. Exiting students from special education has become a national interest given the increase in students being identified as needing special education services compared to those that are leaving (or not leaving) programs offering special services (United States Department of Education, 2002). This

study looked into the area of exiting special education students and thus, the intent of this study is to evaluate what we do in the special education field (Eisner & Peshkin, 1990).

For a study to have transparency and communicability, readers must be able to tell the steps by which interpretations were determined. This study clearly and distinctly communicates to readers the steps that were used to come to the interpretations stated within this study. Readers of this study are not expected to come up with the same constructs that this researcher has or necessarily agree with this study's interpretations; however, understanding how these interpretations were arrived at is accomplished (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

Furthermore, peer debriefing was also done throughout this study to add to its validity and reliability. Throughout this study, multiple peers reviewed and provided critical feedback on descriptions, analysis, and interpretations (Brantlinger et al., 2005). These peers included this study's chair and special education professor, a general education instructor, an administrator, and a special education instructor. In the opinion of this researcher, each of these peers have knowledge and experience in participating in IEP meetings and would have considerable amount of knowledge in regard to the IEP decision-making process.

The results of this study emerged from the reflective dialogue of the participants. Their perceptions, views, and beliefs resulting out of the decision-making process were critically examined in determining how students are exited from special education programs. This study was not intended to generalize its finding; however, only to uncover what one IEP team believed to be the criteria in deciding whether or not to exit a

student from special education. The overall validity of this study was captured by presenting a clear and meaningful link between the research questions, raw data, and findings (Gall et al., 2003).

Validity and reliability were provided by (a) the use of multiple methods (triangulation) that included observation and interviewing; (b) peer reviewing; and (c) providing detailed and meaningful description of the participants and their attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of the decision-making process (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Gall et al., 2003; Merriam, 1998). The emergence of themes, patterns, and ideas surfaced in this study helped answer the two research questions:

1. How do IEP teams determine if a child should exit from special education? What, if any, exit criteria are used to determine if a child no longer requires special education services?
2. What are the various beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes that IEP teams adopt through the processes involved in exiting students from special education programs?

In conclusion, this study was conducted and reported not for the purpose of generalization but rather “to produce evidence based on the exploration of specific contexts and particular individuals” (Brantlinger et al., 2005, p. 203). It is the belief of this researcher that this study will give readers insight into the decision-making process that IEP teams may go through and the influences that groups use and are subjected to in an educational setting, in particularly, an IEP meeting. Through this study the reader will see that educational course structure, human relationships, and self-advocacy skills

deeply impact the success of students that have been exited into the general education classroom from special education programs.

CHAPTER 3

FINDINGS

Introduction

This study was designed to explore the decision-making process that an IEP team adopts when determining whether or not a student should be exited from special education. In the course of researching the decision-making process and the criteria used in exiting special education students, one might also believe that members on an IEP team each hold a certain amount of influence over the decisions being made. For example: Does the administrator possess a certain amount of “power” being the one in charge of the school? Is the general education instructor considered the “expert” because of their extensive use of the curriculum? Or can it be that the special education instructor is “legitimately” the one with the best knowledge of the student’s academic needs given their day-to-day interactions with that special education student? This study set out to explore both the nature of the decision-making process and the relative influences individual team members have during that decision-making process.

In an attempt to understand this process, it is vital to understand the players involved and understand what is being communicated. Therefore, this chapter begins with the personal context of each of the players so that the readers can gain an understanding of the roles that each player assumes on the IEP team. This personal context provides a rich description of each participant and provides valuable insight into the personalities, functions, and “influences” that are interwoven into the decision-making process of this particular IEP team.

The next section of this chapter will lay out the findings of the research. For the findings relating to the question concerning the nature of the decision-making process, the data are reported as themes established in the analysis of the interview transcriptions. The findings relating to the second question regarding the relative influence of individual team members are analyzed using the conceptual framework of Raven's (1992) Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence. Findings from the secondary source, observation from the IEP meeting, are included to triangulate the interpretation from the interview data.

Personal Context of IEP Team Members

The first interview of each member consisted of gathering background information on the participant. Gaining background information provided a better perspective of their internal beliefs, values, and attitudes regarding education, special education programs, and ultimately, the idea of exiting students from special education programs. It became quickly apparent that these IEP team members had many common beliefs and attitudes regarding the education of ALL students, not just special education students.

Student: Sarah

Sarah was once a quiet, shy, reserved young lady who now appeared to have come out of her shell. As a 16 year old in her junior year of high school, Sarah drew attention to herself through her looks, speech, and appearance.

As Sarah walked into the conference room, it was quickly understood that she was different than other students her age. With jet black hair, black makeup, a black stylish

and fitted jacket, oversized black jeans, Van shoes, and a thumb ring to boot, she represented every aspect of the word “Gothic.” As she came across the room to take her seat for the IEP meeting, a CD player attached to an inside pocket with the cords leading to a set of earphones clamped to her neck completed her look. “Rock is better than rap,” she spurted out as she turned off the noise blaring from the small device. It was Madonna. The adults around the table easily recognized the once popular (or, as some would argue, still popular) artist.

Sarah’s interests include music and the fine arts. Her main objective in life is to become a popular musician and performer. She talked in length about how she likes all types of music; she is in pursuit of putting a band together, and loves to write her own songs. Sarah spends much of her time alone writing music, working a job, or doing homework. She also loves to help her stepfather work on cars and wishes to live in Georgia near her grandmother sometime in the future.

As a tomboy kid that pretty much received C’s in classes, she struggled throughout her schooling. She admitted not getting along with too many of her teachers and the students at school are often “immature!” Dealing with anger, anxiety, and attention deficit disorder have all haunted her past attempts at being independently successful. She commented, “I think it has to do with all the home problems I went through. My parents were always fighting. That has an effect on people, you know!” Officially labeled as a special education student in sixth grade, Sarah hit bottom in her 10th grade year as she admitted to drug and alcohol use. Now drug free, Sarah has set a goal for herself that her father and brother were unable to accomplish—to graduate!

Parent: Linda

Sarah's mother is Linda. Linda was born and raised in a small town in Georgia. She married her childhood sweetheart, Bobby John, and had her first child just out of high school. At the age of 38, her oldest child is 19 with Sarah just three years behind at 16. After 15 years of marriage, her marriage grew apart and she divorced Sarah's father. "We started off too young and grew up and apart," Linda solemnly recalled that chapter in her life.

Physically, Linda stands approximately five foot, five inches. An average height for a woman and also appeared to be just slightly overweight. With her shoulder length, brown, wavy hair, she spoke with articulate and intelligent thought. She commanded her audience with her vigor, zest for life, and eagerness for learning.

Once both her children were in school, she went back for an associate's degree at a community college in Iowa. Shortly after she received her degree, she went to work and focused on being a single mom for 11 years. Now that her oldest child was out of school (never graduated) and her youngest had entered high school, she decided to attend nursing school. Going after her dream had put much strain on the family. Mom found she stretched herself too thin trying to find time for a boyfriend of two years, kids, a job, college, exercising, and keeping a house together. "I have a real good relationship with Sarah," she insisted. Later, Sarah reciprocated the feelings with just as much enthusiasm and sincerity. Linda proudly professed, "My goal was to be done with college before Sarah gets into her senior year. You know, so I can focus on her that last year. I just

want to have a really good job and let that be her year. I want that last year to be all about her!”

According to the special education instructor, she is an active advocate for her daughter, especially when her daughter wants something from the school. However, he also expressed that she supports the school and him in regard to the programming that has been done for her daughter. She admitted, “I just think that Dale [special education instructor], Larry [associate principal], and Val [general education instructor] have been very, very supportive and understanding of Sarah’s IEP.”

Special Education Instructor: Dale

“A farm boy from Iowa,” Dale is 42 years old, with specks of gray accenting his dark brown, short hair. Standing approximately six feet, two inches high, Dale directs his room with much confidence and experience. Dale obtained a bachelor’s degree in agriculture education with a minor in mental disabilities from one of Iowa’s universities. He worked as an educator in a mentally disabled classroom for two years in Iowa before moving to Seattle, Washington to pursue a master’s degree. With the intent of going to the University of Washington for a degree in behavior disorders, he ended up at Seattle University teaching four years in a behavior disorder classroom. Dale recalled, “My intent was to go on and get an educational specialist degree in psychology, but changed my mind for all the wrong reasons . . . encouragement from administration.” With an administrative certificate, he became an assistant high school principal and worked for four years. After three children, he and his wife decided to return to their roots and came back to a 4A school in Iowa to work two years as a high school principal. With the

addition of another child and opportunities for his wife to go into business for herself, Dale returned to the classroom as a special education teacher in a neighboring 4A, rural Iowa high school. He has been there for the past four years.

While conducting the interviews in Dale's classroom, piles of paper on the desk and around the room were quite noticeable. Not a messy classroom, but obviously a lot of paper work was associated with his teaching responsibilities. Posters on the walls, chairs neatly arranged in rows, and a squeaky heater all accented this environment. People periodically popped in to engage in friendly dialog, only to abruptly stop themselves when they saw me sitting there with a tape recorder. Comments such as: "I'll catch you later! Maybe when you have some free time," "I'm sorry, I'll drop by another time" and "Hey, give me a call when you are done" were cheerfully interjected throughout the first interview. It was not difficult to conclude that Dale is a friendly, respected, and appreciated educator at this school.

General Education Teacher: Val

Val was the first to be interviewed of all the participants. She is 34 years old. She grew up in a small town in the Midwest before graduating with a bachelor's degree from an Iowa university. Val majored in speech and theatre. As a secondary certified instructor, she spent the last 12 years teaching various courses in language arts, speech, and theatre. Her career extends over three school systems, each having a high school enrollment of 1,000 students or more. One school was located in Missouri while the other two are in Iowa. Val stayed five years in her first teaching position, two years in her second and is currently finishing up her fifth year in her third teaching position. In

addition to experience in teaching language arts and theatre classes, she has acted as class sponsor, play/speech director, and team member on various committees. Currently, she is this school's language arts instructor for the high school and is one of the certified staff specialists that work two periods in the Success Center, the school's at-risk program.

Her husband also teaches at this high school and is the school's informational technology instructor. Although she and her husband would like to have children, they do not have any at this time. In her free time, she enjoys participating in community theatre, community organizations, and reading. She is also finishing up her course work for a master's degree in K-12 Administration from an Iowa university.

Val is a petite, energetic, and expressive woman. Through the interviews and observations of her with students in the hallways, she appeared to possess an aggressive, articulate, and confident personality. With a nervous start to our first interview, talking with Val quickly became comfortable as she is a personable educator who enjoyed talking about education, leadership, and kids. Although she only stands at approximately five feet, two inches in height, there is an aura about her that illuminated intensity and respect, yet liveliness. Throughout the interviews, Val provided animation, humor, and sincerity on the various topics discussed. Her ambitions included making a difference for a large population of kids and keeping education child centered.

Administrator: Larry

A robust, 50 plus year old, Larry's position (according to the name plate on the edge of his desk) is Director of Student Services. However, most people refer to him as the assistant principal. All our interviews occurred in his office, which was located down

a short hallway in the back of the attendance office. Four chairs, a coffee table, magazines in a rack, and a line of students waiting to visit with the assistant principal were gathered in a small area between the desk of that attendance clerk and his door. Once inside, visitors are left feeling cramped with little room to move about. Two chairs were available to choose from on the visitor's side of his desk. The University of Iowa and Democratic memorabilia sat all around his office displaying his loyalties in education and politics. Homemade lamps, golf figurines, and fishing outings are also mixed with the various fixtures throughout the office. Book shelves, piles of papers, and unfinished projects were sprawled about as though they had been sitting there for months. Obviously, the room was a visual of this man's "to do list" that time would not allow him to accomplish.

On a personal level, Larry is married to the second grade teacher, has a son from his first marriage, and has two step-daughters. His son and one step-daughter are in college and his other step-daughter is a junior at this high school. He enjoys fishing, collecting political memorabilia, and crafts (like the lamps that sat around his office). Larry sat behind a rather large, solid, red-oak office desk. As he looked over his bulky desk and began to speak, an unspoken message was conveyed--"I have authority," or does this researcher dare say, POWER?

In each interview, Larry was found to be constantly fidgeting, looking around, and unable to give his full attention to the interview. Distractions were everywhere: emails every couple minutes notifying him of new messages, the telephone ringing, people knocking, intercom messages coming from his secretary, papers being shuffled

from one pile to the next, and a television monitor constantly scanning four different areas of the school simultaneously for his occasional supervision. With twenty-six years in education (all at this school), he had spent the first twenty-one as a behavior disorder instructor and the last five as the assistant principal. "It's kind of like *Welcome Back, Kotter*," Larry said with a witty analogy.

Area Education Agency Representative: Scott

While waiting in the hallway for the next interviewee, this researcher noticed that a man with a small, thin body frame of average height carrying a coffee mug, walked casually down the hall. An introduction of, "Hi there, I'm Scott, the school psychologist" came with a smile and gentle eagerness to talk about this study. This was the AEA representative that was part of the study. Scott is in his mid 40's, married, and has three children (two girls and a boy) all under the age of twelve. Coming out of working in the psychiatric ward in an Iowa medical facility, Scott went back to college in Illinois for a degree in school psychology. Shortly after receiving his degree, he returned to Iowa to work for this district's middle and high school. He has been employed here for the past twelve years.

Scott's words were accentuated with passion and love for kids. Unlike some in education who go through the motions, Scott showed exhilaration for his work. Commenting on what he liked about his job, "Constantly working on issues of resolving minor problems to major problems in a kid's educational plan. So the variety is pretty good!" As an avid hockey fan and player, he likened special education to hockey. "Just like the puck quickly exchanges from player to player with the audience anticipating a

successful goal, it takes many players in special education to guide a student successfully toward the goal—independence!”

Findings

The findings of this study were connected directly to the research questions:

1. How do IEP teams determine if a child should exit from special education and what criteria is used when exiting students from special education programs?

2. What are the various beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes that IEP teams adopt through the process involved in exiting students from special education programs?

In addition, the findings were also analyzed through the lens of the conceptual framework of Raven's (1992) Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence. This lens depicts how interpersonal influences (power) affect decision-making, in particular, exiting special education students.

Within these two research questions six distinct themes emerged. Related to the first research question of how determination is made and what criteria is looked at for exiting a special education student, the following themes were evident: (a) the student's ability to meet his/her IEP goals, (b) the student's ability to self advocate, (c) the adequacy of an alternative setting to provide a successful environment for the student leaving special education services, (d) the opportunities available in post-secondary placement, and (e) the student's level of interest in changing his/her placement. The emerging themes related to the second research question, the beliefs and perceptions that IEP team members adopt related to the exiting process, included: (a) a personal relationship with the special education student provides legitimate knowledge in

problem-solving, (b) persons with expert knowledge know what is the best placement for special education students, and (c) informational data are used to assist IEP teams in the decision-making process.

The Decision-Making Process

How do IEP teams determine if a child should exit from special education? What, if any, exit criteria are used to determine if a child no longer requires special education services? While searching to answer this question, the emerging themes that surfaced included: (a) the student's ability to meet his/her IEP goals, (b) the student's ability to self advocate, (c) the adequacy of an alternative setting to provide a successful environment for the student leaving special education services, (d) the opportunities available in post-secondary placement, and (e) the student's level of interest in changing his/her placement. Comments such as: "When all IEP goals are met and services are no longer being used," "when the student is able to ask questions for himself," "there are services in college that IEP students can use," "the system that the child is entering needs to provide opportunities for them to succeed" and "the student has to want to succeed for himself" were all reoccurring statements heard throughout this study. These statements assisted in understanding what this IEP team believed are the factors that indicated when a child should be considered for exiting special education services.

Demonstrating that the student is meeting his/her IEP goals

When making decisions as to whether or not a student should exit a special education program, this IEP team reported that multiple factors were utilized. Interestingly enough, all IEP members agreed that an established set of criteria does not

exist to guide these decisions for ALL students. Rather, each student may have an individual list of factors that guide the IEP team in making the decision to exit special education services. The associate principal, Larry, commented, "I don't think that there's a set criteria. I don't see how that could be. If you are really calling it an individual education plan, then creating a set of exit criteria for all students to be evaluated against defeats the idea of a plan being individualized." The AEA representative, Scott, was asked, "Is there a set of criteria for exiting students from special education programs?" His short response was, "No." With continued inquiry into the idea of set criteria, he was asked, "Do you think there should be set criteria for exiting students from special education?" He responded:

I think there could be some set "guidelines" to help an IEP team consider it. But when it comes down to the actual exiting, I don't know if that can be done. How a disability affects one student may affect another one completely differently, even though the disability is exactly the same disability. Maybe some guidelines of when an IEP team should be considering exiting. That's an interesting idea!

When the general education instructor, Val, was asked, "Is there set criteria for exiting students from special education programs?" her face showed an embarrassing smile and she replied, "I don't know!" With further questioning, she uncomfortably commented:

This is out of my area. I think that the special education instructor would have a better idea on this one. I would imagine that if a student is meeting their IEP goals and can advocate for themselves then the student should be considered for exiting. But to be honest, I really don't know if there is set criteria. I don't think there is. Is there?

However, there were some common criteria that each of the six members expressed throughout the interviews. One such criterion was "meeting IEP goals." This response was the most common and consistent response given by all members regarding a criterion

evaluated in determining exiting of a special education student. The student's parent, Linda, stated that she believes her child would no longer need special education services when "she has met her goals and has become independent. It will be when she takes off and is doing well in all her classes independently." When asked how an IEP team determines if a student has met their IEP goals, again, this IEP team delivered a very clear and consistent response—through data! The general education instructor, Val, supported this by commenting:

When a student is being considered for exiting, the IEP team should first and foremost look to see if the student has achieved all of the IEP goals and as a team we believe that there is no support is needed. As an English teacher, skills are assessed through standard based curriculum. So for example, in my class, I have a general rubric to use for data collection. It's a four level writing rubric where they are exceeding the standards, meeting the standards, approaching the standards, or below the standards. I'm pretty honest with kids about if they are approaching or below the standard and if they still have work to do. When the student is meeting the standards it means that they are right on the up-and-up for their grade level of writing. It's all about what the data is saying as to whether or not they need accommodations or not.

Once goals are determined by the IEP team, it is the data that are used to determine the students' success of meeting his/her IEP goals. When discussing with mom about how she knows if her child is reaching her goals, she replied:

We look at her IEP. Now that she is in high school, it's more about her IEP goals, basic tests, and the ATL test [an English graduation requirement test]. She has always scored low in her basic tests. Whether or not, ya know, she needs special education as much as before? Well, it's obvious that she doesn't because of her grades. And her scores are higher than before. But she still struggles with school.

Scott, the AEA representative, also commented on collecting data when determining if a student meets their IEP goal:

The [IEP] team helps. If it's a behavior disorder student and the student has had an IEP goal of complying with authority then the IEP team would write specific

criteria. You know, in 45 days Derek will exhibit no more than one compliance issue with a teacher, parent or authority person. We lay it out like an IEP goal. Then we keep data on it. Then if it is a good goal and data is collected on it, the IEP team just comes to the meeting and it's just like how many has the student had? Three. Nope we're not going to do it [exit]. At least that's a starting point.

Val also commented on the idea of assessing IEP goals needing data by stating:

Data is needed! I mean, I think that there has to be proof that they have met the IEP goal. So for example, the data that I would expect for a writing goal is proof that the student has improved in their writing. There is a collection of materials or portfolio which is data that shows that they have improved their writing skills. So there has to be data first, and then I suppose we can form our opinions on that data. The data would have to show that the student is reaching goals before we could talk about exiting special education.

Meeting IEP goals was clearly a criteria used by this IEP team when making decision regarding the programming of a student, including exiting decisions. This was abundantly clear as these participants continued to refer to a students' progress as a starting point for further discussion. "Did she meet her goals?" Val would quickly ask when she was questioned as to whether or not Sarah was ready for exiting. "He hasn't met his goals on his IEP," replied Scott at the idea of exiting another student from their IEP. Sarah was asked, "Do you think that you [Sarah] will be exited before you graduate?" She solemnly responded, "I doubt it. I don't think that I will pass my ALT tests by then."

Meeting IEP goals is a criterion that this IEP team uses when considering exiting. The belief of meeting IEP goals was clearly articulated and repetitively stated by all IEP members throughout this study. Students must become goal orientated before this IEP team would engage in discussion about exiting.

Goal oriented. Across the board, IEP members expressed that setting and meeting goals was a major factor in determining if a student is progressing toward exiting special education services. General education teacher, Val, stated, “We try to really talk about progression and goals. Other than the climate, the central purpose of an IEP meeting is centered on checking on current IEP goals. For example, as the language arts teacher we always talk about writing and reading goals with kids.” IEP goals are collaboratively made by all members of the IEP team.

Through this collaborative decision-making process, goal setting is organized around the student and that student’s needs. When students are not goal orientated, success seems to be further away, if at all possible. With liveliness and a smile, Linda explained, “Special education is to teach her [Sarah] to be independent in her own learning and not rely on her IEP as much. And they have achieved that a lot. I mean she has really taken responsibility of her own learning.”

Through goal setting, students are taking ownership of their education. Ownership continued to be identified throughout the interview process as being a critical factor in determining a student’s educational success. Linda went on to brag about her daughter’s goals:

She talks about college now. When she was in ninth grade, she rarely talked about that type of future. She even talks outside of that. She talks about ideas to fall back on. She would like to be a performer. If that doesn’t work out, an architect or graphic designer. She at least speaks realistically about her future now.

AEA representative, Scott, recalled a case in which an IEP team did recommend exiting:

When the 45 days were up, it was pretty unanimously supported by the parents, the student, and the IEP team. He would begin his 10th grade off the IEP [as a

general education student]. Brian [the student] was a good kid to work with because he truly took ownership of his problems once we zeroed in on them. I worked quite a bit with him in helping him identify his “triggers” that caused his anger. Once we did that, he went home and created this barometer of how to deal with the anger. So, he took ownership. When you see that in a kid, that’s probably one of the biggest factors for exiting—when they’re responsible for themselves! Conversely, that’s probably why we don’t exit a lot of students.

To this IEP team, guiding students in goal setting was not only best practice educationally, but a necessity for students in achieving their IEP goals as well. Scott candidly affirmed, “Meeting IEP goals are a critical factor before students can exit special education services!”

Data convergence. While setting goals is important, how one assesses those goals is equally important. When determining whether or not a student should be exited from special education, this IEP team looks at the data to determine if a student has met their IEP goals. When asked how IEP teams determine if a child in special education qualifies to be exited, Dale answered:

That’s data driven! Usually for the kids that I have exited this year it’s been using the data we get from the ALT tests [school math test as a graduation requirement] and from their regular classroom performance. When the data shows that they have met their goals, then exiting becomes a discussion for the IEP team.

As this IEP team had acknowledged, over the past few years, data has become a greater driving force behind decision-making at IEP meetings. “The whole data thing is a fairly recent trend in education. I mean it’s only been just recently, you know, where we’ve really started looking closely at data,” emphasized Scott. Scott’s body language showed concern while discussing exiting processes. He stated:

But when there is an issue of exiting I would be called in. We would make sure to look at as much data as we can to determine if that’s [exiting] going to be a good decision. We do have a lot of 45 day trial outs and my role in that is to

really help objectively lay out the criteria for the teachers to, and the team to, evaluate once the 45 days are up. It seems like a lot of decisions are made on “gut” than they are on data. I’m not necessarily saying that’s a bad thing because “intuition” and “gut” are good too. But for an exiting criterion, you really want to have some clear objective criteria. So, the psychologist part of me wants to say let’s get some real clear definition of what we’re looking for. If we are looking for zero behavioral outbursts in the 45 days, let’s make sure we drive that home!

According to Scott, a 45-day out is used to see if students can succeed in the general education classroom. This process involves the special education student being in the general education environment 100% of the time without special education support. During this 45 day out, success for the student is defined (a goal is set) and data are collected to provide the IEP team with a true representation as to whether or not the student is succeeding in the general education classroom and is a candidate for exiting special education services. Scott says that these “objective goals” are critical in the assessment of student achievement in the classroom. He continued to state, “We are only now just getting more objective goals in the IEP. Since you have objective goals in IEP’s, you’re going to have objective goals in dismissals, too.”

Many of the IEP team members also expressed that the emphasis on data driven decision-making is more effective in getting appropriate services for students. “Teachers can say, ‘I think we need to add a goal and here is the data to support it,’” commented Scott as he discussed who can initiate changes in the IEP. Dale’s comment, “We look at what the data says and go from there,” made it apparent that data are consulted during the decision-making process that IEP teams engage in together. Even Linda referred to the general education teacher’s assessment as significant in determining whether or not a student can succeed without special education services.

However, little was stated about the data providing more discussions for exiting candidates in special education from the participants in this study. Val acknowledged that very few students are exited by saying, “probably one or two a year, I would guess.” Val believed that students need to be considered for exiting more often, however, she stated that the data should clearly demonstrate that need. She commented:

The kids who get staffed out are more than likely resource kids who are just checking in with their teacher once a day. If they feel it is the best decision then the IEP team would have to make a collective decision to exit. But there has got to be solid evidence that it’s the best choice for the kid.

Scott concurred with Val’s conclusion that exiting rarely takes place by stating, “Very few exiting IEP’s are held. I am not sure why that is, but we just don’t have that many exits from special education.” Yet, they both agreed that the data needs to clearly articulate the student’s success prior to exiting discussions. Phrases such as “look at the data,” “what progress has been made” and “observations show” all indicated that this IEP team looks at data to guide its decision-making.

During Sarah’s IEP meeting the team was observed discussing the goals set for Sarah. It became quickly apparent that “meeting IEP goals” and “evidence of this behavior” was important to this team. Sarah’s goals included:

1. Given resource support and general education language arts instruction, Sarah will be able to read and recognize 9th grade vocabulary words with 90% accuracy.

2. Given general education instruction and resource support, Sarah will compose written assignments with fewer than 3 errors in spelling and mechanics per 100 words.

Meeting these goals guided the IEP team and their discussions for the majority of the IEP meeting. The special education instructor and the general education instructor both

provided data in relationship to these goals. Probes, classroom assignments, and special education worksheets were evidence of Sarah's abilities. Given her growth, some discussion was held regarding keeping the current goals or establishing new goals. However, given the data presented, the decision to continue IEP goals was agreed to by the team as Sarah had shown growth, but had not yet met these goals entirely.

According to this IEP team, demonstrating that a student has met his/her IEP goals is done through setting and reaching goals. Then, these goals are to be evaluated against the diverse data collected to justify a discussion about exiting a student from special education services. When students are goal orientated and convergences of data are used to wean students off their IEP, exiting students from special education becomes more of a possibility.

Student's Ability to Self-advocate

Being able to "self-advocate" was a clear and repetitive theme that the IEP members identified as a factor in determining whether or not a student should exit special education. Comments such as: "being able to ask questions for themselves," "intrinsic motivation is needed from the student to succeed" and "passing classes and graduation requirements" resonated in all the interviews that were conducted. Principal Larry believed that the goal of the IEP team is to provide services that will lead the student from dependency to independency. He stated, "I think we [the IEP Team] need to encourage the student to become as independent as possible with their academic work. We also try to follow up on the behavioral thing. To be successful in regular classes is

the goal. I think you try to integrate as much as possible until they can manage on their own.”

Being able to self-advocate was reiterated from one team member to the next. Self-esteem, motivation, and passing grades were all categories that emerged as factors impacting a student’s ability to self advocate. Sarah genuinely questioned her disability by saying, “I was very insecure when I was a little kid and I started in special education when I was in 3rd or 4th grade. I think if I was more motivated back then and wasn’t so insecure, I would not have been in special education. That’s because I’m really a smart person!”

Self-esteem. “It’s critical that students feel confident enough to ask questions. How can I learn? How can I achieve? And I define that as self-advocacy!” commented Val. How a person feels about themselves often impacts their performance in school and/or the workforce. Dale also related the need for students to have self-esteem and to self-advocate when he stated:

It is better for them [students] to be weaned off the services and become independent. I guess what’s always struck me is that Boeing doesn’t have a special education shop. You know? They [students] are going to have to problem-solve and advocate for themselves. So by the time they are in high school if they have the ability to get to the point where they can advocate and problem solve for themselves, we should force them to do that. When they start to do this, they become more confident in their abilities.

Although self-esteem in itself is not a sole factor for a student to possess in order to be considered in being successful, it does have an indirect role. Reflecting on this issue, Scott assertively articulated:

There are very bright kids that have very poor emotional intelligence or maturity. So when it is that clear that they are poor in maturity or emotional intelligence,

it's clearly a factor that you are not going to be considering them for dismissal. Understanding that humans are fallible and it's ok to ask questions is a sign of maturity. Not being afraid to advocate for yourself is maturity and emotional growth.

Sarah even admitted that her growth in her self-esteem has been seen over the past couple years by stating:

I finally realized that high school is a small part in your life. The people really don't matter so much, so why sit there and dwell over what they think about you. Because once you are out of high school you are probably never going to see them again. Sure I have some problems with speaking in front of others. There are some other people out there that can just get up there and just talk, but I can't. But with everything else, I have a lot of confidence.

Linda expressed that her daughter's esteem will elevate when she becomes successful in school and in life. Linda believes that signs of her daughter having a positive perception of herself will become evident when Sarah "becomes independent. When she has just taken off and does well in all her classes." Linda believes that the special education department has helped "a lot" in the area of raising her daughter's self-esteem. As she reflected on what she perceives as the role of the IEP team, she contended:

The role of the IEP team is to find a way to get her through this process and just get her the support that she needs to get through school. Eventually, to teach her to be independent in her own learning and not rely so much on the IEP and so much support. And they have achieved that a lot. I mean she has really taken responsibility for her own learning. She talks about college. When she was in the ninth grade, she rarely talked about that type of future. It was just getting from one day to the next that was a huge deal. Now she's talking about it [her future]. She now stays after school to get caught up. She talks about what she likes to do. She talks about her future!

When Sarah was asked why she felt that she is succeeding more now than in past years, she grinned and said:

It's because I'm not so drugged out! I mean, that is sad to say, but I didn't think that when I was doing drugs that it mattered. But it really does change the way

you think about school and everything around you. When I was doing drugs, I was fighting with my parents. I had no respect for teachers whatsoever. And now, since I haven't done drugs since last year, I don't argue with teachers. I don't argue with my mom. I am very focused and I know I'm going to be successful and I'm going to graduate!

However, when Sarah was asked if she thought she didn't need special education because of her growth, she backpedaled:

I'm not saying that I don't need special education, but I've gotten really better with being independent with my homework. I used to be horrible. I used to like not want to do it by myself at all. And not do it at all and I've gotten really better with going home and shutting everything off and just doing it.

As questions were asked around exiting students due to their self-advocacy skills, this IEP team agreed that exiting rarely came up in IEP meetings, rather it be this IEP or other ones. However, as they begin to consider students for exiting special education services, Scott pointed out that there is a breakdown in that process:

The breakdown is that we error on the conservative side as an IEP team. It is kind of an identity formation period in these kid's lives. They are trying to figure out who they are. We respect that highly so we do not want them to fail. And, so often times we just error on the conservative side and keep them in special education. We're not absolutely 100% sure that they are to be exited then we hesitate. Because the goal is to make kids feel good about school and themselves and they don't. So, I think that is the biggest obstacle. It's hard to be real liberal in your decision-making on an exit unless you are pretty confident that they will succeed.

According to Val, when considering exiting a student from special education, she explained:

I think that for the most part exiting students is usually because of the circumstance. Well, one reason [to exit a student] is when the student no longer needs the services because their skills have improved or they've reached a certain level of performance. For example, if one of their IEP goals is to advocate for themselves and they've got to the point where they are doing that regularly, then probably we stop that particular goal. Usually, when they start advocating for

themselves they start learning and they have an investment in obtaining those skills. So this is a time when I guess a student would be staffed out.

She continued by giving an example of when this happened with another student of hers:

So I had to kind of corner him and say, “OK, can you tell me what helps you? What’s working and what’s not working?” I had to coach him for the first half of the year to ask me questions. We came up with a list of questions he could ask when he needed help with particular things and now what he does we don’t even have a list any more. He will come to me or he will raise his hand. He’s not afraid to ask when he needs clarification. And, so, to me that’s self advocacy. When a kid can ask the questions when they do not understand something instead of having the teacher figure it out for them all the time. And he is only a sophomore!

Sarah was asked whether or not her failing class was 100% the fault of her disability.

Sarah summed it up the best as she sternly said, “It’s never 100% because of my disability! Sometimes I just give up. My success in school also depends on how I feel. I have confidence, now. I’m more focused and I know that I am going to graduate.”

It was unmistakable that becoming a self-advocate was a factor in exiting students from special education. This became evident early on in this study when participants continued to stress the importance of the student being able to ask for help by themselves.

Scott gave the best example when he explained his perception on being disabled:

The problem is that some people think that they can fix a disability. That somehow a disability will go away after hard work. Once a disability, always a disability. Our job is to teach a student how to recognize their disabilities and give the student tools in overcoming their disabilities. Once a student knows how to seek help for themselves, then they have a better shot at succeeding in the classroom.

Motivation. Motivation also plays a big part on a student’s ability to succeed in school. According to Sarah, it is very frustrating for special education students who try hard to succeed to work along side others who don’t work as hard. These types of

students are perceived as being just plain lazy and unmotivated. Disgusted, Sarah described her frustration while working in a special education class:

I think most of them [other students in class with Sarah] just really don't care. They are lazy. Like in my history class. It's a big class. I love the teacher and everything, but there are some kids in there that just goof off. They really don't care. They are so much smarter than they think they are. And if they really would just push themselves, I am pretty sure they might have something. Like [Joey], he was in my special education class since I was in third grade. He obviously has a disability and everything. But there are some kids in there [special education department] that just act out and just really don't care. They just want to slack.

Val stated, "There are some situations where a kid who's not the most motivated child will milk the system a bit." As a general education teacher who sees unmotivated students in special education, she believes it is her responsibility to work with the special education instructor to keep these kids accountable to their level of ability. She went on to explain:

We happen to have a pretty good situation where we've got some very open communication with teachers in special education. If a student is manipulating a situation once, sometimes it goes unnoticed, but if it becomes a pattern, that is when it gets noticed. So, if a student has an IEP goal that they can have a test read aloud to them and they need extended time, and say they have resource eighth period, and they got to go catch the bus at the end of the day. Well, for the most part we would let them continue to test the following day if they don't finish the test. Well, if they go home and study and they do their bit that they didn't do for the original portion of the test and come back and whoop the rest of the test—that's manipulation of the IEP. So if a kid continues to manipulate the system and the IEP is not servicing them well, they need to be staffed out.

Even Scott agreed that motivation has a lot to do with a student's ability to succeed in the general education classroom and commented:

There's not a lot of confounding factors that interfere in a third graders performance. But as you get older, sixth, seventh, and eighth grade, motivation gets into it and work habits get into it. Even oppositional behavior gets into it and it gets very cloudy. So, I am a little skeptical that we can keep track of some

academic progress and for that to be a true indicator of what's really going on with a kid. We prefer to still take a comprehensive look at the kid and determine what other factors are impacting this kid who has learning disabilities.

As the interviews progressed throughout this study, motivation was a key factor in getting students to succeed in the general education class. This IEP team agreed that student's who were more motivated to succeed were quicker to become independent and ready for "the real world"—general education classes. However, motivation is often impacted by many factors, including substance use. Sarah described it best:

Well, like my freshmen year I wasn't very successful because I was into drugs and I drank. I was hanging around with the wrong crowd. Basically, I just changed my friends and got involved with other things. Not with school. I never really got involved with school. I tried. It's just something I've not really gotten in to. But I'm involved with other things. I play my guitar and do my homework. I don't party very much. I mean I go to parties, but I don't drink. I stay away from that. I have friends now that don't drink or smoke or anything. Which is a good thing. So basically it just has to do with how you deal with things in school. If you are motivated or if you are hanging out with the right group.

As the assistant principal, Larry also saw other factors impacting a student's motivation to succeed. The environment that a student is coming from can also impact their level of motivation for success. In fact, some of these students just give up completely and stop coming to school altogether. Unfortunately, at these times students are exited from special education for not utilizing services versus showing that they have progressed toward motivated, self-advocating, and independent learners. Larry pointed out:

A student who is not coming to school, I may send out a letter saying your son or daughter isn't taking advantage of the special education services provided and we are removing them from our rolls at this time. If they would like to make a commitment to coming to school, please get a hold of our guidance counselor or teacher and we will convene a new IEP meeting. We have done that.

So, how does one become motivated? Sarah thinks that motivation comes from just growing up and realizing that the only person to do it is YOU. She acknowledged:

I think it just has to do with growing up and once you are out of high school there's going to be nobody there so you better get used to it now rather than wait until you are finally on your own. I mean it's nice to have people to help you, but I'm trying to get used to just being independent, really independent. Because I know in college nobody is really going to help me.

She continued to explain her view on being motivated by stating:

I will always have this disability. I am horrible at history. I mean horrible! It doesn't click. I read a history book and it's just "blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." And so when you don't really get something you kind of feel like you need to give up. Because you feel like there is no way. Which like there's always a way and I'm not going to give up anymore. I'm not!

The general education instructor, Val, also agreed with Sarah. Motivation and learning to be successful comes with maturity. She believes that special education will hurt a student when that student becomes too dependent on others or the special education services that they are receiving. She commented:

Making accommodations for the student instead of teaching them how to make the accommodations for themselves can really hurt a student in the long run. That's the kind of growth that I like to see from a freshmen to a senior. When a senior comes to me and says, "Can you make me a graphic organizer?" I say, "No! You can do it for yourself. You know what a graphic organizer is and you know how to do this. You are going to do it yourself." Where, as freshmen, I would probably show them or coach them along. It's all about motivation to do it themselves. If a kid is not showing any growth from freshman, sophomore, junior, senior year or are continually dependent and want us to do all the work for them, I would see that as a major problem. Not necessarily that they would get kicked out of special education, but that they [teachers] definitely need to make the student step up the plate somehow.

The bottom line for Sarah's mother, Val, is that she doesn't want Sarah "to use special education as a crutch. I want her to be independent" and motivated to succeed on her own.

Passing Grades. As a student gets into high school, more demands are put on the student in getting passing grades, because without passing grades a student can not graduate. As somebody not employed by the school, Scott gave an outsider's point of view: "When we get into high school, it's a whole different ballgame. It is about credits and that kind of stuff. I think the students are kept in special education because the demands are high and the pace is quick. And they will lose credits as a result of that." Passing grades is the white elephant in the room when discussing this as criteria for exiting special education. Nobody appeared to want to talk about it very much; however, every member of the team implied that passing grades does in fact impact whether or not a student is considered for exiting. Linda stated, "Now that she is in high school, it's more important. She needs to do well on her IEP goals, her ITBS and her ALT test." Linda commented how her daughter used to be:

She would struggle and struggle with her grades. She would struggle with being organized. She's a lot better now, but still very unorganized. No matter what we brought her, she would still be unorganized. We would go to the store and buy things to help her and she'd still be unorganized and fail her classes.

When Sarah was asked if she would ever exit special education, she replied:

I've thought about it. I've thought about it because I've gotten more smarter and everything. I was thinking that maybe I don't need this [special education]. Maybe I can do it by myself, but I will probably always be in it until I graduate. Cause I won't pass my ALTs. You have to pass them to graduate.

Discussion on what assessments are done to consider a student for exiting, Larry administratively commented, "I think by the student's performance. How they performed in the regular education classroom leads them to being staffed out."

So what about assessing a student's performance in the classroom? Val said that it is sometimes a matter of giving the student a reality check. To explain, she gave an example of one of her students:

It's really hard. For example, an SCI student was integrated into English classes because he so desperately wanted to be in a regular English class. Well, we do have some tracking going on in our school because we have regular English classes and then we have our English class for kids who struggle with our ALT tests, getting them in a requirement score. Well, though scheduling an ALT English class wasn't going to work for him so he wanted to try the regular general education class. Well, he wasn't making it and we had to sit him down and show him where he was at. He agreed and we had to place him more appropriately to a different English class.

Val went on to say that assessment of a student in a class is the result of ALT scores, written portfolios, alternative reading tests, and their overall grade in class. When I brought it back to the idea that ALT test was an exiting criteria, uneasiness on Val's part was quite noticeable. She wasn't sure if she should share that information. The probing continued:

Ken: Do you believe that passing ALT is a criteria for exiting special education kids?

Val: I think that showing significant growth in skill areas is crucial. As far as a kid having to achieve all of language arts, reading and math to exit? Yes, I guess that would be pretty important, but you know, I have to be honest with you. I'm going to give this to you straight. I see kids with really high skill levels and freak out and don't pass those tests. So we already had a kid who has a significant reading problem and they show huge growth and they've gone from a 6th grade reading level to an 11th grade reading level. Then when they take this test, they don't get the minimum requirement but I see huge growth in the kid. I know that they're an independent reader. I know that they can comprehend anything. I know that they have the tools to comprehend but they don't know the definition of paradox and that's going to trip them up and they don't pass the test. I have an issue with that. So for me growth is more important than if they actually hit the top score.

Ken: But the reality is that ALT may be a criteria to exit?

Val: I don't know if that has actually been determined by our school.

Ken: Sure.

Val: At this time. It has been determined as a graduation requirement but our special education students need to show significant growth and I think that is most important.

Ken: And I guess what I'm getting at is that there is kind of that white elephant in the room; a kid is not going to pass ALT—so let's keep him in special ed.? Do you think that is what goes on?

Val: Yes, I think that exists.

Linda was not real sure if Sarah will need special education the rest of her high school career. She stated, "Whether or not Sarah needs special education, obviously it shows in her grades that Sarah doesn't need it as much now as she used to." When asked what it will look like when Sarah could be exited from special education, Linda responded:

Sarah won't need special education when she is able to just reach goals that she sets for herself. Succeeding in school at an average level, like B's and C's. I don't expect A's and neither does Sarah. Just to be able to go to school and not get so frustrated with learning. I mean learning can be fun, but when you have a learning disability . . . it isn't fun! It's work. She has to work ten times harder than the other students. You know, just to get a paper done or to prepare a speech or to finish a math assignment. She gets distracted. I think to get rid of it would show that she doesn't need special education anymore. To get her to a level where she would have fun learning and it would not be so difficult for her. It would not be such a struggle. That is when I think that Sarah could be exited from special education.

Dale delivered a story regarding a student who was in special education that he believed did not belong there. Through an animated delivery, Dale retold this story:

You know we've struggled with the kid that I looked at this year for exiting. She's taken biology and chemistry. She's going to have math through pre-

calculus. She took advanced composition. She took western civilization as a freshmen and she has a 3.2 grade point average. What the hell is she doing in special education? Her parents were adamant that since there was still a discrepancy that until she passed her ALT tests, she would stay in special education. Her dad was the assistant superintendent, so he knew that if she didn't pass her ALT, well, he knew that with IEP kids we make other accommodations. She just plain didn't belong in special education anymore!

The administrator, Larry, was asked about what he thought was a criterion for exiting special education. He said, "I think it boils down to the student's performance in class. I think that's the criteria." The special education teacher had a differing opinion. Irritated at the system, Dale went on to say that success should be defined as "when learning takes place. Unfortunately, we define success as meeting the requirements for graduation!"

He continued with a bit of fire in his words:

There's a whole philosophical stance that goes on that we shouldn't even assign credit. We should find something different. It's not reality. We've got too many kids that say, "I'm not failing your class, I want out. Drop me out of there," and stop going instead of having this mind set that I didn't pass, but I'm going to learn something from being there. Just the whole traditional credit thing screws us all up. It has kept us from developing life long learners. I think we have used it to make decision in exiting.

Even Val agreed with his philosophy:

I guess with that kid he was failing test after test after test. I said, 'Is the stuff too hard?' And he's like, "Yes. It's way too hard." And I said, "Then you need to tell me that and we need to make an accommodation." So he's doing OK, but I mean, sometimes it comes down to that I'm kind of an advocate for let's not grade kids at all and let's let them learn. But sometimes those grades can be the reality check. And also I hate to have them compare themselves to other kids in the room. However, they see that they are really struggling and everyone else isn't then we need to be honest about it.

The IEP meeting also showed that the IEP team members believed Sarah was gaining the ability to self-advocate for herself. "Sarah isn't afraid to ask questions like she used to be," commented Dale. Sarah even expressed that she feels much more

comfortable this year than past years and knows that she can always go to the special education teacher if she needed something. Sarah was observed as being a participant in this IEP meeting and gave her thoughts in a helpful and productive way. “What do you think?” Sarah was asked on numerous instances by the general education instructor, the special education instructor, or her mother. This observation clearly showed the team giving Sarah opportunities to self-advocate and address her needs as a special education student.

While discussing the ideal candidate for exiting, Scott said, “When you get a kid and see that his grades are positive and work habits are great. Those are the ideal candidates that you can kind of just say, go for it!” Self-advocacy was a clear and resounding criterion for IEP teams to look at when determining whether or not a special education student should be exited from special education. According to this team, self-advocacy in students has three strong outcomes: (a) students have higher self-esteem, (b) students are more intrinsically motivated, and (c) students find that passing classes is important to their success.

Adequacy of General Education Classroom

As stated above, meeting IEP goals and self-advocating were two themes that emerged during this study. However, it was very evident and provided a critical perspective from this IEP team’s point of view that when a student is being considered for exiting from special education services, the setting that the student would go into must be strongly considered. According to this team, the setting in which the student will find himself can assist or hinder that student’s ability to reach his goals and be a self-

advocate. Dale expressed a frustration in that schools typically fund both extremes of the academic scale, the high end and the low end. Frustrated by the system, he said:

So much funding is at the top end and the bottom end. There are a lot of average kids that need appropriate programming too. Our struggle here and the reason it is so hard to get our kids successful outside of special education is because everything here is geared toward the top end. If you aren't on the top end, there are no lower level academic classes for the general education kids. And we [special education department] have fought for it and fought for it. Kids here are expected to start in algebra. Well, you know that's fine but there are still a lot of kids that still need another year of basic, basic math. So we either remediate or we accelerate here. That's the system.

When exiting special education, the IEP team looks at what the curriculum and instructional delivery are in the general education setting. If either of these components is not conducive to the student's learning ability/level, then the student is rarely exited. Scott responded, "It's kind of a strange thing. I mean, you build special education. If you build it, then go forth. And so once they are in it and comfortable it's difficult for parents and teachers to let that strategy go." From the view point of a general education instructor, Val thinks that the responsibility of a classroom teacher is to adjust curriculum and instruction to meet the needs of ALL students, not just the ones on IEPs. She adamantly stated that she and her colleagues need to rise to the occasion. She believes that for the most part, the teachers at this school do rise to that challenge. She expressed:

If a kid receives services, modification, study skills in one area, then that has to be applied in my classroom [general education classroom]. I've got to be aware of it. I have to be able to reach all students. In order to best teach those kids I have to make those accommodations and modifications. For example, it is the same thing if a kid doesn't have an IEP, but I notice that they are having a really hard time getting started with every paper. I will give them several different strategies to get them started. So I can't imagine just saying "Hey, I'll just let the special ed teacher take care of it. That kid is on their roster you know." And I would have to say for the most part that's what most teachers do; they adjust for all their

students. I know there is that groups of teachers that work on the idea of “If you can’t get it, good luck.” I just don’t see that as the majority.

As the interviews continued, it was apparent that this IEP team believed that it is imperative that the curriculum of these alternative settings challenges versus obstructs the cognitive ability of the student. In addition, the instructional delivery needs to facilitate the learning of each student.

Success, in the eyes of this IEP team, is not dependent solely upon the student’s doing, but in concurrence with the environment in which the student is placed. Val was able to give a clear understanding of this belief when she commented, “As a classroom teacher, it is my job to see that every child learns. It’s not the job of the special education teacher to see that my students learn English. It’s mine. I have to try different strategies for different students, whether they are special education or not.”

Curriculum offerings. If a student is to be exited, in what environment will he/she be placed? What is being offered in the general education classroom that would provide the student success with the general education content? These questions are asked by this IEP team when considering exiting students from special education services. In answering this question, this IEP team liked to see that the appropriate placement challenges the student’s cognitive ability, but doesn’t prevent or obstruct the student from succeeding.

Val said that the instructional delivery is important to the success of students by pointing out a new instructional strategy that their school is participating in this year in their math department. She called it cooperative teaching. She enthusiastically explained the program:

The past two years we have initiated a math curriculum that is team taught. This is the first year that it is team taught. Last year it was kind of researched, I think. They were getting staff development on how to implement this strategy. Every special education teacher teams with a general education math teacher for one period a day. The student population in those classes has been somewhat hand selected so that the kids are in the appropriate placement for kids who are struggling with math. So the math teacher is basically team teaching with a special education teacher. The special education teacher is providing strategies for accommodations and modifications. The math teacher is providing the general education expertise. Together they are creating these classes to really help kids, all kids, who are struggling with math. And the fact that the whole math department has owned that and the whole special education department has owned that. The pressure is not on just one teacher. It's not just on one department chair. It's on everyone and they are working together to make that work. So, that's one specific example of how we are providing assistance to kids that struggle.

Scott believed that education has fallen short of helping out the at-risk populations; however, he believed that this school has made some improvements. He expanded on these thoughts:

The thing that's always been tough about exiting kids from special education is the belief that they go right from special education right to general education. There is not an understanding that they should maybe go to an at-risk program to get some support. If a student is approaching a goal, making progress, and we [the IEP team] feel that there's another setting in the building that can meet the needs of the student, then you go ahead and use that program. But, a lot of time the mind set is they don't think about that at-risk population because it's probably not as a formal of an institution as special education. It's kind of a twilight zone. If you have good teacher one year it doesn't necessarily mean that teachers there for the next year.

Scott agreed that the options for low end general education students [at risk] are scarce. He believes that more special education students would be exited into the general education classes if there were more classes taught at a lower level with the appropriate instructional delivery. When asked if it is a failure of the instructors, he commented:

Oh, I wouldn't say failure within the adults making the decisions, but maybe failure of the system, of the building that the student is in to accommodate weaker

skills. I think the teacher on the IEP teams really do an outstanding job of really evaluating what a kid needs, but that's not the issue. It's unfortunate you can't fit round kids into square pegs. To be honest, special education is the way it is because we don't have enough options in general education. So, it's more of a frustration with not having enough options for the kids in the general education setting than anything else.

Val agreed with Scott in that exiting students is not necessarily all about the student meeting goals, but also about programming. If the general education setting is not offering an appropriate setting, then students are less likely to be exited. She vigorously stated:

Well, as I have said before, if a child needs services, if they need assistance, their needs have to come before the system. I don't think when a kid graduates that you say, "OK, now you're done. You won't ever get help again." So, I don't think that there is a particular, golden rule or date for a kid to be exited. I think it really does depend on the learning plan and what their individual needs are. So there is not a specific date. It's more what their needs are and how the program they are going into can help them.

"Sometimes, I just need extra time to finish my work," commented Sarah. She continued, "I can get that in the special education room." In addition, Linda talked about Sarah's relationship with the special education instructor. She stated that Sarah will go to him regarding classroom problems. She discussed:

I've noticed how Dale doesn't just work with Sarah but he kind of works as a mediator when she has problems with other teachers to kind of say, "OK," and to also say "Sarah, come on." He kind of reinforces the situation with all the other teachers. There have been times where she got really behind in math and she probably shouldn't have been given the extra leeway because she really was blowing it off. But he did. He said, "OK." It's like that one more chance for Sarah. And he will go to bat for her. If he thinks she's serious and she's put forth a good effort, he will go to that teacher and say, "Will you give her another week?" And they usually do. You know, because he suggested it. And that helps her. So he just kind of works with them.

Curriculum needing to be more appropriately delivered to students proved to be a factor in students being successful in the general education classroom. However, teacher willingness was also a prevalent category that emerged from these various interviews. Teacher willingness to provide these strategies was identified as yet another critical factor in a student's success in the general education classroom. Curriculum offerings and teacher willingness went hand-in-hand in assisting students in general education classroom in becoming successful.

Teacher willingness. According to this IEP team, how willing the general education teacher is to provide accommodations in the general education setting becomes a criterion for exiting students from special education programs. In addition, the instructional delivery of the classroom content also needs to facilitate the learning of students in order for exiting to occur. The administrator puts this belief into perspective when he compared a teacher to a doctor, "You had asked me before what role the parents play, but in the end it's the teacher that provides the programming. So I would say it's the teacher that is the so called doctor in this thing. I think they prescribe the medicine with input from parents and students and other professionals." In essence, teacher willingness to engage in differentiated instruction is vital to the success of students in their classrooms according to Larry.

Sometimes teacher willingness and state mandates collide. In order to meet state requirements, students are sometimes shuffled from class to class in an attempt to find compatibility between the classroom and the student. Sarah knew this all too well as a

quiet classroom and infrequent disruptions were essential to her best learning environment. She confirmed this perception when she stated:

Actually I changed a lot of my classes. Like I went in there for about two days and I didn't like some of the people that are in there and they were distracting me. I would have to change classes. So it was more like changing classes and making sure that the people that were in there were quiet. I would have to talk to the teacher and tell them that something needs to be done about your class, or whatever, because I can't concentrate.

Scott pointed out that the IEP team looks at the whole child, not just one component of the student when making decisions. He indicated, "The whole IEP team kind of makes sure to assess the whole child. I mean, understanding the home environment, understanding their peer relationships, understanding how they cope with anger and stress, and all of that stuff. And so you just kind of talk about other factors that might be impacting school performance."

Val believed that support systems are needed to be in place when a student is exited from special education. Following up on this idea, she continued:

The student needs to know who they can contact if they find trouble or are having difficulty surviving on their own academically. For example, is it once a month for the kid to be checking in with somebody or even the roster teacher? Or that it's brought to the attention of the general education teachers at the beginning of the year. "You know, Johnny's been exited as of last year. Try to keep a close eye on him. See if you notice anything." Just so that teachers who haven't had him before are aware of the student's needs. And sometimes, especially if you have that two and half months in the summer and the kid gets exited at the end of one year going into the beginning of another, there needs to be some sort of process or plan to keep tabs on the kid to make sure that they succeed.

All agreed that the general education teacher is the biggest deciding factor in the success of special education students in the general education setting. This IEP team looks at the teaching staff and curriculum before making decisions to exit students from special

education programs. Will the instructor be willing to accommodate students? Will the instructor use curriculum that will challenge, but not impede a student from learning? If the answer is primarily “yes,” then this IEP team was more apt to recommend exiting. However, high schools are made of several periods in a given day with multiple teachers, philosophies, and procedures. This provides doubt and uneasiness within IEP teams, including this one, and thus reduces the number of recommendations for exiting. Scott believed that the classroom teacher has a lot to do with the student’s success in the general education classroom. Scott said that the general education teachers are “the ones that directly teach specialized instruction. So they really have a tricky position in that they are in there working with that student at the micro level teaching them how to do certain academic skills.” He also believes that there is a systems error in how we educate students altogether:

It’s a system issue. I mean, special education exists because these kids don’t make it in the general education classrooms. So if they don’t have accommodations or modifications available to general education students, you kind of got to keep them supported in special education. There is an underlying thought prevalent throughout school from kindergarten on up in that we’ve got to prepare this kid for the next year. First grade is really tough. Ninth grade is even worse. Eleventh grade is really bad. College is something else. And so on. And that little piece of competitiveness or preparation, whatever you want to call it, that holds a lot of weight in the decision to exit kids.

Interesting enough, when Sarah was asked what it would take for her to succeed in the general education classroom, she responded with “more time to complete work” and “giving more examples of how to do the work.”

The special education instructor said that his philosophy is to run himself out of a job through successful training of students and staff in dealing with disabilities to a point

that all students can be instructed in the general education classroom. He optimistically pointed out, "My philosophy is that at the high school, special education services need to become progressively and increasingly unnecessary. So, all of my IEPs are written with the attempt to wean off any accommodations that are made for the student." Even Val tried to wean students off accommodations as much as possible. When asked how parents respond to the idea of removing accommodations, she provided an enlightened story involving one of her students:

I think that most of the parents that I've dealt with say, "Wow! They are ready for the next step? Great, let's give it a try." And I think sometimes we can even say, "Let's try this or that," if I'm going to make any sort of major change like that. For example, I'm thinking of a different student that I've had in class. He needs tests read aloud to him but he really improved on a couple of literary analysis skills. So, I thought he's improving and I made the recommendation with his mother and with his roster teacher that he not have the next quiz read aloud. Not a major test, but a quiz. He tried it on his own but I did put him in the hall as he needed extended time. This was fine with him as I also made one other student sit in the hall to finish up. So he wasn't totally by himself. He did well and I reported what his score was to his mom and his roster teacher and then they said, "OK, let's try the next test. Let's try the same thing and see what happens." Over time, in my class anyway, he didn't have his tests read aloud. I didn't get resistance but I said let's take baby steps to get to that place. If it wasn't successful for the kid then I wouldn't do it.

How teachers instruct and interact with their students is a contributing factor in a student's successful transition from special education to the general education classroom. When teachers are willing to teach to the diverse learning styles of students, success can be seen by all students in that classroom. Dale commented on this belief by stating, "I think Val has a very strong relationship with Sarah because she truly does accommodate for Sarah. She is just a good teacher. She does a lot of one-on-one stuff for kids who need it, whether or not they are special education students." As stated before, Sarah

believes that extra time is the most essential strategy that classroom teachers can give their students in becoming successful. She pointed out the benefits of a special education classroom, "You have that extra time to go in that classroom to do your homework. You have special help from the teacher. They take the time to help you with whatever you need help with and they support you." As a general education instructor, Val tries as many strategies as possible to get students to be successful in her class. She stated:

Clearly identifying how a kid reads best, how they retain the knowledge best, or how they write best is important for teachers. Knowing this, I try to provide webbing exercises or laptop computers to help my kids. Or outlining or brainstorming work together. Whatever works best for each kid. I try all kinds of different modes or strategies.

Dale added to this philosophy:

The accommodation is the issue the general education teacher has to provide during the IEP meeting. So, for me if the teacher says I think they can make it without this or that, I push to get that accommodation removed from the IEP. I do this because our kids are not going to get accommodations in the work place. They will some, but there is a lot of things that we do that a work place is going to say, "We are not going to accommodate that." So, I guess for me the goal is always, if a teacher says we don't need it, I push to remove it. One fortunate thing here is that there are not a lot of teachers who will say they don't need the accommodations just to avoid having to make accommodations. You know, there are teachers out there who would probably fight for that just because they don't want to mess with it.

Unfortunately, there are teachers who are not willing to accommodate students in the general education classroom and this provides the IEP team with doubt as to whether or not a student should exit special education. Val, embarrassed to admit, confessed:

By agenda you would mean it's not what's best for the kid, but best for them [the classroom teacher]? If that is what you mean. Sure, I've been in those experiences. I have been in those experiences with teachers who have the philosophy that we were just speaking of. The kid's never going to make it in my class. They can't make it in my class. There's no way they are going to ever pass. We may as well get them out now. They are just going to get a failing

grade. Come on. He can't do it. Why is he here? So sure, I think that some teachers are just not willing to accommodate and they go into the IEP to see that the student is not in their class.

During Sarah's IEP meeting, the general education instructor Val was observed multiple times being willing to try interventions with Sarah as an attempt to have Sarah become successful in her classroom. "Let's try it and see what happens," commented Val at the suggestion of having Sarah try to deliver a speech to a small group instead of the whole class. Val's willingness to be flexible and try different instructional approaches for Sarah was clearly displayed through the communications (physical and verbal) that Val delivered during the IEP meeting. In addition, discussion for next year's English class revolved around "who" was teaching which English class in an effort to provide Sarah with a good match for her senior year. This team was very good at not downgrading instructors, but rather simply stating, "I think that Sarah will do fine with this teacher."

Curriculum offerings and teacher willingness are essential for a successful transition out of special education. Sarah's comment regarding the special education room that she goes to during the day shed some light on what students, not just special education students, are asking for from their general education teachers. She said, "It's always quiet in that room. That's what's really nice. And he will talk through some of my work with me and help me. That's another thing that's really nice. I mean they really, really help you!" Having an alternative program that challenges students and facilitates learning was also an important factor in the determination of exiting student from special education programs at this school according to the in-depth interviews of this IEP team.

Alternative Setting in Post-Secondary Placement

Throughout this study, the desire to have post-secondary opportunities for students was consistently and continuously mentioned by the participants interviewed. It was known throughout this area that community colleges offer programs exclusively to students with disabilities. In this area, the Lative Program (name changed for anonymity) was sought by local high schools, especially this one, for post-secondary programming for students with special needs, such as Sarah. Thus, an alternative setting in post-secondary placement became an obvious theme for this study. While examining this notion, it was discovered that general education students were not admitted into this post-secondary program offered by the community college. These programs, at other community colleges as well as this one, were offered strictly for students on a current IEP. Consequently, IEP teams deliberately kept students in special education programs in high school based on the desire to place the special education student in post-secondary programming.

The idea of keeping students in special education due to the opportunities afforded to students with an IEP was a critical finding in this study. Services that the community college provides for special education students were a distinct factor used when making decisions about exiting. In fact, this researcher believes that this factor is one of the major factors used in exiting decisions. In situations where a student wants to attend a community college that offers special education services, this IEP team discussed why the student should NOT be exited versus how the student COULD be exited prior to graduation. This IEP team acknowledged that certain services at the

community college were available only to students on a current IEP and therefore, was a strong consideration that kept students from being exited from special education services. This IEP team believed that students who can be given additional services in a post-secondary setting should be given that opportunity if at all possible, to ensure a successful transition from high school to post-secondary institutions.

Limited access available. So why would an IEP team keep a student in special education for college programs? According to this IEP team, the curriculum and support in programs like Lative are more conducive to assisting the student in being educated appropriately. Unfortunately, they agreed that retaining student in special education programs for the exclusive right for services in the community college is, yet again, another example of a flaw in our educational system. This is primarily true because only special education students are eligible for these programs that community colleges offer, such as the Lative program. Thus, it influences the IEP team in keeping students in special education programs.

Scott confirmed that there are programs, support systems, and accommodations made at colleges for students of special needs. He stated, "You can get special education or learning disability support at any major university. So some of our resource level, level I, less severe or milder disability kids can go on to a regular four year institution and be successful with those accommodations." In addition, Dale also admitted that they have a number of special education students that do stay on an IEP so that they can program for IEP students at the community colleges. He stated, "I've got four kids who hopefully next year will be at the community college in the Lative Program. They are technically

still our student, but they'll get their IEP services at the community college." While interviewing Scott, he acknowledged that the Lative Program at the community college influenced exiting decisions of special education students:

Scott: Well there are quite a bit of resources popping up in the agencies and communities that address and help find the appropriate transition services for kids. We have the community college as an option for some kids, resource level kids. They can go there without much extra help. They are pretty capable students. We have within the community college a thing called Lative, which is a vocational transitional program. In this program, they are learning more specific vocational skills, such as welding and that kind of stuff. And so, when you are really considering the transition services of special education students you have this whole gamut from the community college all the way down to sheltered workshops for our MD kids. They all get invited to the IEP meetings by their juniors and senior years. These are all people in agencies that help provide services after high school, transition things after high school.

Ken: Do you think kids are kept in special education just so they can participate in that Lative Program?

Scott: That thought has come across. Students that go to the Lative Program still have to have good attitudes, good attendance. It's really for the really good kids. I'd say there have been a few kids where the student was not exited because an IEP can get them into the Lative Program. And they can be probably a lower functioning kind of kid, really good, hard working kind of kid that really could be exited but the concern is how are they going to make it if they don't go into the Lative Program?

Ken: Do you think that prevents students from being exited?

Scott: Yes. I think that that's a huge factor. It's only been the last five to seven years that there's been a tremendous amount of resources, money, put into that at-risk population. For my first few years here, back in the early 90's, it was either general education or special education. Very slim pickings for at-risk kids who are kind of in-between. Now the trend it let's address all kids and there's a whole group of kids that don't need special education but just need a little extra help.

As this IEP team was continuously asked about their decision-making practices, they did admit that there are times that keeping a student on an IEP is beneficial. There

are programs at the college level that are only assessable to special education students—those with a current IEP. Val stated, “A lot of pressure is being put on American public education or any educational system K-12. Yet, if they choose to go to the next step after high school, there are two systems at our community college that have a support system for kids with learning needs, special education needs.”

Linda expressed concern with Sarah being exited from her IEP because she thought Sarah may need the assistance in college and the IEP is a way to get that assistance. She stated that Sarah is scared of college classes and worried about whether or not she can succeed in them. She commented:

I think it scares her with college because I was talking to her the other day. I told her that she would have to take all those core classes again. I don't think that she realizes when she takes college she's got to retake math, comps, and retake all those general education classes. I think she thought after high school she was done with that and now she could just do art classes and have fun. And I told her, “No, you have to take the college level; you know you still have to do those things. You know, even though you struggled with those things and you can still get support. Even in college, especially since you have an IEP.”

Dale said that sometimes it is the parent that wants their child to attend these community college programs and that keeps an IEP team from exiting a student. Dale commented, “And that unfortunately becomes the reason we don't hand out staffing on some kids because they still qualify. There are probably some kids in that grey area where you could probably push them out the door but the parents hesitate because they know that the Lative Program is out there.” Scott confirmed this belief when he stated that the IEP teams look at the Lative Program as an option for students when making post-secondary plans. He said that the curriculum at the Lative Program is geared toward students with vocational plans. He commented:

We have a lot of kids who go into the community college's Lative Program. Who, through their senior year, continue to receive their support and then we have a transition system to get them into the Lative Program. The community college focuses on that transition as well. So, I guess we don't just take the level of skill but the maturity of the kid as well. When considering age, emotional and psychological behavior, maturity, and if they are ready to be independent then that's where they go, the Lative Program.

Dale, embarrassed to admit, said:

If they still qualify for services there are certain reasons beyond high school why you keep them qualified. I've gotten in trouble with that one before because I really wanted the kid to be able to do the Lative Program through our community college and the kid's parent wanted them to. However, the AEA monitor came back and said that's not a reason to continue special education services. Unfortunately, there are a lot of gray areas in special education.

Discussion regarding Sarah's ability to overcome her disabilities in a post-high school setting was also observed during her IEP meeting. Although the IEP goals drove the discussions, analysis of alternative post-secondary settings was also considered by this team in making decisions. Comments such as, "Do you think you can do that [give a speech] in college?" "What services are available for students in a college setting?" and "The Lative program can help you in that area [reading comprehension]" were noted and led the researcher to believe that an alternative post-secondary setting is a critical factor in determining whether or not to exit a student from special education services.

Change is Undesired by the Special Education Student

While not emerging as a theme or category themselves, this IEP team mentioned that one additional criteria used in exiting decisions is the special education students' desire, or lack of desire, to exit special education services. Scott said, "Students are comfortable in special education, so they stay." However, this idea is important to mention in this study because of its implications that exiting practices are influenced by

the level of confidence and motivation special education students acquire throughout their educational experiences K-12.

Special education programs provide comfortable setting. Special education programs provide a safe, structured, and comfortable setting for students. Students in special education programs have been given the opportunity to establish a trusting relationship with their instructor and are allowed to learn differently than general education students. Linda commented, "I think Sarah feels that she can go to Dale for anything. I've noticed that anytime something happens in a classroom she'll be like, 'Can I go to Dale?' It's a safety zone for her. So she always falls back on that. And that's good because she feels comfortable there." When Val was asked why some special education students never exit from special education programs, she responded:

I think that kids in general have a really difficult time with change and they may say they want the change but it's hard for them to take it. It's hard for them. They get in a comfort zone. We all get in our comfort zones and just like when you have a seating chart and you can say to kids on the very first day sit where ever you want. I don't even have seating chart but they will still sit in the same place everyday whether you have seating chart or not because they get comfortable in a certain place. I think that happens with students in any area, not excluded to just special education students. Maybe they are comfortable and that's where they've gone and this has been their safety place. And they feel comfortable especially with their roster teacher. That it would be difficult for kids to make that change.

Throughout this study, "relationship with the teacher" was a common phrase used by IEP members with reference to a student's ability to succeed out of special education. This same concept is interpreted as being a reason that a student chooses NOT to leave special education. Students have established a relationship with the special education instructor and are comfortable in that setting. At the conclusion of this study, discussion

was held with Dale regarding a new academic program that this high school would start in the fall. The program is an at-risk program that would be taught in a different building. This program would allow for differentiated instruction practices to reach students that learn differently than the majority. He stated that special education students were not ideal candidates for the program given the specific instructional support that special education students would require and the limited resources in this program for such students.

During this “informal” discussion, Dale expressed that he was hoping to be the lead instructor for this program. He also commented in that he thought Sarah would be exited from special education and brought out to the program for her last year in high school. He believed that she would do fine if he were the instructor. The researcher was intrigued to know what came of this and gave Dale a telephone call early in the fall, even though interviews were wrapped up for this study the previous spring. The researcher was surprised to hear that Dale was not granted that transfer as he earlier spoke as though he was a perfect fit for the position. Dale said, “The decision split the administration up and it was a mess.” The probing continued, “Is Sarah in that program?” He responded, “No, she is still in special education.” Given these last two short, impromptu conversations it leads the researcher to believe that the decision for Sarah to remain in special education had a lot to do with her relationship with Dale and the comfort of the special education program.

Sarah showed no signs of wanting to be exited during her IEP meeting. In fact, at one point, she commented, “I can go to the Dale’s room because I can concentrate there

and I know I can ask for help if I need it.” Sarah and Dale obviously had a good relationship that was built on trust and comfort. Both were able to joke around, smile, and even disagree with each other that showed they were quite comfortable with each other. Their genuine and close relationship was quickly established in the IEP meeting through their verbal exchanges, body language, and gestures that they periodically exchanged with each other.

Summary of First Research Question

While analyzing the first question of this study, “How do IEP teams determine if a child should exit from special education and what criteria are used when exiting students from special education programs?” the following findings emerged:

1. If a student has met their IEP goals, then exiting becomes a discussion for the IEP team.
2. Students who are goal-orientated have a higher probability of being exited from special education services.
3. In making decisions, including exiting, IEP teams review data from various stakeholders to determine student progress.
4. The degree of a student’s ability to self-advocate influences an IEP team to make an exiting recommendation.
5. A special education student’s self-esteem impacts a student’s ability to advocate for themselves and to be successful in class, including the general education classroom.

6. Success in the general education classroom is dependent upon a students' motivation to succeed.
7. Exiting special education programs rarely occur for students that are not passing classes and/or meeting graduation requirements.
8. Post-secondary services provided for students on an IEP determine exiting of students from special education services prior to graduation.
9. A spectrum of appropriate course offerings in the general education setting is not available for students exiting special education.
10. Teacher willingness to engage in differentiated instruction practices assists in student success in the general education classroom.
11. Alternative settings in post-secondary placements influence IEP teams to retain students in special education programs.
12. Special education students resist exiting due to the anxiety of change.
13. Students are unwilling to exit special education programs because they are comfortable in that setting.

It is important to know that while this study discovered many aspects of how IEP teams make decisions regarding exiting and what criteria is used, the researcher would like to convey that an overwhelming emphasis was placed on two factors by this IEP team when making decisions about exiting students from special education programs. These two factors were: (a) lack of curriculum offerings for special education students to enroll in that aligns with graduation requirements and (b) post-secondary placement services that are provided only to special education students. While students could be

exited if they met their IEP goals and became good self-advocates, this practice was rarely applied if course offerings were not appropriately offered for these students. In addition, if services were offered at the college where the student was to attend after high school, again, exiting was rarely conducted. Exiting students from special education is a complicated process for this IEP team and while all factors mentioned in this study emerged as important criteria for this team, adequacy of the general education classroom and post-secondary placement services stood out among the factors used in making exiting decisions for special education students.

IEP Team Beliefs, Perceptions, and Attitudes

The second question guiding this study is: What are the various beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes that IEP teams adopt through the processes involved in exiting students from special education programs? As the question was explored through analysis of the responses, this IEP team made it clear that relationships, expertise, and data are all main components that impact the exiting process of special education students. During this analysis, the focus centered on the social power(s) used by IEP team members as illustrated by Raven's (1992) Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence. While it is apparent that many influences are used throughout the decision-making process of implementing a student's IEP, three such influences, or power, were more prevalent than the others from both the observational data and the interviews. These include: (a) legitimate power, (b) expert power, and (c) informational power.

A Person's Relationship to the Student Provides Legitimate Knowledge for Successful Problem-solving

Legitimate power is the ability for Person A to require or demand compliance from Person B based on Person A's "right" or "authority" over Person B (French & Raven, 1959; Raven, 1992, Erchul & Raven, 1997). In short, one submits to the requests of another because of that person's legitimate position/authority in asking for compliance. In this context, parents and students rely on the educator's recommendations as they have "legitimate" knowledge of "what is best for the student." Yet, school personnel will also defer to the parent as the one having legitimate knowledge of the student and the student's needs. This IEP team suggested that decisions made during IEP meetings, including exiting, are often agreed upon by others due to the legitimacy of a team member's recommendations.

"It is all dependent upon the relationship that the student has with the classroom teacher," stated Val, the general education instructor. She continued, "If a student lacks self advocacy skills and doesn't have a good relationship with his teacher, he's sunk! After all, it is the classroom teacher that knows the student the best and what will and won't work for the student." Members of this IEP team described that people with a relationship and interest in the student "legitimately" know what is best for the student and how they can succeed in school. Sarah's mother stated, "Obviously, I know what is best for Sarah, I'm her mother. Everyone pretty much will go with what I think is best because I am her mother and I know her best."

As this IEP team discussed influences in an IEP meeting, many reported that the teachers and the parents know what is best because of their intimate relationship with Sarah. They had “legitimate” influence on her because “I have a really good relationship with Sarah, I’m her mother” or “I see her everyday and know what works.”

Educator. The educator is the one working with the student in the classroom on a daily basis. It is the educator who observes the students’ strengths and weaknesses in regard to their academic abilities. When talking about the role of the teachers on the IEP team, assistant principal Larry commented, “Usually it’s the general education teachers who have had the student. I think it is their role to communicate that student’s ability to function in a general education class.” So naturally, the educator possesses a legitimate influence on others during the decision-making process when making educational programming decisions for students. The special education instructor, Dale, insisted that the classroom teacher was one of the most influential members on the team and that parents would agree with the teacher’s recommendation because of the amount of time a teacher works with their child. When asked who he thought was the most influential, he responded, “Most of the time, it is the general education teacher that is the most influential person because they’ve got them in the general education classroom. Even when those teachers have only seen the student for a semester, I still think that they are more influential than others. I think the parents would agree.” Linda, the parent, agreed with Dale’s perspective in that her daughter’s teachers “know her abilities” because they spend so much time with her during the day.

The student, Sarah, also gave credit to her teachers for helping her succeed in school. She believed that her teachers have been a big influence on her success because they “helped me see what I needed to work on and helped me to do it.” Although she didn’t clearly articulate that her teachers’ legitimate influence provided a path for her to make positive decisions, she stated that she would not be where she is today if it were not for her teachers “pushing her along the way.” She commented:

I know they have helped me a lot to get through my classes and they've done everything they can. There have been some times when the special education teacher has got onto me and said, “Hey! Listen! You need to do this and if you don't do it then you are not going to graduate.” Those were the times when I was really ready to give up, but I didn't. So they help a lot. I can say if it wasn't for special education I probably wouldn't be here.

Sarah’s mother, Linda, also agreed that the teachers, both special education and general education, have made an impact on Sarah and her success in school. She stated, “Sarah comes to him [special education teacher] when she’s frustrated. She comes to him when she’s failing or when she’s behind. All of those weak points, that’s the first place she goes. And so I feel that he would be able to speak strongly about her skills because he sees her all year long.” Linda expressed that Sarah can sometimes be a people pleaser and if she has a good relationship with a teacher, she is more compliant to do her work and succeed. “All these adults just tell her what to do. And she just does it,” she said with a sigh of approval and thanksgiving.

Other IEP team members looked to the educators on the team to have legitimate influence on curriculum decision-making, including whether or not a student can succeed in the general education classroom. Reflecting on the members of an IEP team, Scott, the

AEA representative, expressed the legitimacy of having the classroom teacher on the IEP team:

Even though I sit on some committees for math instruction, I'm still a consultant. I have a tough time providing a lot of curricular advice as I can't be real firm. I can give them suggestions. I mean I never even taught. My training is all as a psychologist, not a teacher or curriculum consultant. It's the classroom teacher that has more knowledge in this area than I do. They have training in teaching.

Larry agreed with Scott in that the educators have a legitimate reason to influence decision-making because "we are the experts." Larry insisted that input from the parents during IEP meetings is important; however, the educators should "obviously" be the ones to program for their students. He commented:

I think it [IEP meeting] is more successful when the parents give input and let the teacher and school decide how that plan is going to work. I mean, I think their input is invaluable and obviously it's important. It's the law. But I think we are even more successful when the parents let us [teachers] kind of be the experts in devising the plan.

Even Val chimed in by stating, "The roster [special education] teachers know the kid the best, especially if they have followed the student for four years."

As this IEP team reflected on the influences that each member has on the decision-making process, they agreed that the educators definitely have some legitimate influence in the student's programming. To what degree? It all depends on the relationship that the teacher has with the student. Val was adamant that success in school was largely based on the relationship that teachers have with their students. As we talked about the influence within the confines of an IEP team, Val confidently explained that the relationship between the teacher and the student lent legitimate trust from the student to the teacher. When talking about the power of this type of influence, she insisted:

It may be the kid has a particular relationship with a general education teacher that they don't have with their roster teacher. So I suppose it would depend on the relationships, you know, as the foundation. I think that's really the foundation for all learning; that kids feel comfortable and safe in their environment. So, yes, I hate to give you that "depends" answer but it depends on that relationship.

French and Raven (1959) and later, Raven (1992), suggest that person's perceived to have legitimate power have influence over others. Comparing that education, educators may have legitimate power during the decision-making process on an IEP team due to their relationship to the child and their role as an educator. As educators, they have legitimate authority due to their knowledge over the content as well as in their role in working with the students. Therefore, educators would possess more influence on the team when making programming decisions, including exiting decisions. This study confirmed that the student and the parent did indeed look to the educators in this setting as "knowing what is best" for the student, and thus, giving the educator a justifiable voice that influences the decisions being made during IEP decision-making.

Parent. While educators may have legitimate knowledge in making curriculum decisions for students, members of this IEP team also confirmed that parents also possess legitimate authority during decision-making on an IEP team. The mother-knows-best premise is very evident with this IEP team and was verbalized by the various participants throughout this study. "Obviously my mother knows me best," commented Sarah. "I am going to do it for her," she continued as she explained why she had made a turn for the better over the past two years. Sarah continued:

I can go to my mom about anything. My mom finally told me, "You know, you only have so many years in high school and it won't take that long. So if you just try hard and try to block everybody out." I don't know how I did it. My mom just kept telling me and telling me. I just think, "You know what? This is getting old

and I need to just really focus.” I’m going to graduate you know. I’m going to do it for my mom!

Linda was not afraid to speak up and advocate for Sarah when it came to making decisions for Sarah. She felt that she had a “legitimate” reason to ask for accommodations. This was confirmed when Sarah’s mother talked about her role on the IEP team. She stated, “I feel comfortable with the special education teacher because I know if I ask for something, he will most likely put it in the IEP. For example, Sarah doesn’t do well speaking in front of a large group. So we wrote it in her IEP that she can go to the special education room and give her speeches to the special education instructor.” Later on in the interview, Linda affirmed the belief that she has legitimate authority by expressing, “Well, obviously, I’m her parent so I know her better than anyone.” When talking about her influence in the decision-making process, she stated:

I was talking to him [special education teacher] about the speech thing. I can make recommendations whether they agree with it or I agree with theirs. We just kind of work it out. And usually, they do accommodate my suggestion because I know Sarah. I know her real well and I know when she is playing the system and I know when she is not. And I am pretty sensitive to that. Like I said, I didn’t want her to use this as a crutch. I want her to be independent.

Larry agreed that parents have a legitimate influence in the decision-making process. Although he reported that the parents do not have the most influence, he agreed that they have a strong one. He commented:

The parent plays an important piece [on the IEP team], obviously. They are the guardian. They have their wants that need to be met through the IEP. They have an interest in what’s happening with their son or daughter. I mean the parent is an absolute. They are a signee to the IEP if the kid isn’t over the age of eighteen.

Scott, on the other hand, believed that most parents have the strongest influence on the IEP team. He stated:

The parent is the strongest advocate for the kid. Making sure that the kid gets what they need to be successful at school. Parents have a lot of knowledge about their kid and so for the most part we listen pretty closely to the parent. Obviously, you have to recognize with anybody how close to reality they are. I mean some parents have some disabilities themselves. So you have to be aware of that, but the parents are generally the strongest, advocate for their kid.

“I know when she is not telling me the whole story. I’m her mother,” Linda expressed during Sarah’s IEP meeting. Linda was observed as being pretty confident in what she wanted for Sarah and her classes. She stated her relationship to Sarah a couple times during the IEP as an attempt to establish her “legitimacy” for expressing her thoughts and opinions. However, Linda was also heard referring to the teacher or the special education instructor as knowing what was best because they spent a lot of time with Sarah. “You spend a lot of time with her, what do you think?” Linda was observed saying during a part of the IEP meeting when making a decision as to whether or not to have Sarah give speeches in class. At one point in Sarah’s IEP meeting, Dale asked Linda what she thought “given that she was Sarah’s mother.” Dale also referred to Val and her opinion regarding the ability for Sarah to deliver a speech because of her “legitimate” time spent with Sarah in the classroom and work on Sarah’s reading comprehension goals. Throughout Sarah’s IEP meeting, the parent and the educators were obviously seen as legitimate team members to provide data for decision-making.

Throughout the observation of the IEP meeting and conversations with members of the IEP team, they all reported that educators and parents provided the most legitimate influence in the decision-making process during an IEP meeting. This legitimate influence came as no surprise to the members of this IEP team as the educators and parents are the ones that continuously work together to see that the student is successful

in school. Parents are the child's first teacher and best advocates for the student while educators understand the curriculum, accommodations, and services appropriate for students.

Persons with Expert Knowledge Know What is Best for the Student

Webster's dictionary defines "expert" as one being very skillful or having much training and knowledge in some special field (Guralnik, 1980). Raven (1992) states, "We do what an expert tells us because we assume that the expert knows what is correct" (p. 220). When asked why she perceived Dale, the special education instructor, as the expert, Linda commented, "He [special education instructor] specializes in that [special education]. It goes along with the whole thing in that I trust him because I know that's his specialty."

This IEP team recognized that many decisions, including exiting, made on the IEP team are interdependent on the suggestions of experts on the team. "The teacher is the so called doctor in this thing. I think they prescribe the medicine with input from parents and students and other professionals," commented Larry referring to whom he believes to be an expert on the IEP team. Scott sheepishly admitted, "I guess they see me as the expert, especially with interventions. Probably because I am a consultant and have training in behavior disorders."

Although the administrator is often called on for funding questions, the parent can be sought for historical information and the school psychologist may provide intervention strategies, clearly, this team identified the special education and the general education

teachers as the experts of the IEP team. The special education instructor, Dale, expressed who he thinks is the most influential member of the IEP team:

Dale: My voice especially and the teacher's voice are probably the most influential. I think that the parents see that and it's probably more because we're the ones who are with their kids the most. We are in contact with our parents a lot. And our parents know us. I think if you talk to any of the parents and the first thing they would say is let's ask the roster teacher or the classroom teacher.

Ken: And why would that be?

Dale: Because they know us. They feel comfortable with us for the most part. They see us as somebody who has been trained in teaching and has known their kid for a long time.

The members of this team agreed that the expertise comes from the classroom teacher and the special education teacher. In fact, the recommendations of these two members typically influence that of the others on the IEP team. Their expertise in working with the curriculum content and the special education student provides an unconscious submission by the rest of the IEP team to their influences while making recommendations, including whether or not to exit a student from special education services.

Special education instructor. As the members began to explain their beliefs about their roles on the IEP team, they acknowledged that one of the experts on the team is the special education instructor. The administrator, Larry, pointed out that the special education instructor was the expert due to their training in working with special education students and running IEP meetings. As he defined the role of the special education instructor, he stated, "Well, they are the expert. They're the ones who are writing the IEP. I think that a lot of it depends on experience." Members suggested that training and

experience were perceived as making one an expert in special education. Scott was the only member that shied away from calling anybody on the team an expert, even though the rest of the team viewed the special education instructor as the expert. However, Scott acknowledged that training and experience were needed to be considered an expert. He commented, "I don't like the word 'expert.' I don't know why, just, it's a little too freely used, I think. I think of an expert as someone highly trained in a specific area. You know, and maybe it's just too powerful of a word. Knowledgeable in a certain area is fine with me, but expert is a strong word."

Despite the AEA representative's play on the word "expert," this team continued to refer to the special education instructor as the expert on the team.

Ken: Why do you feel that the roster teacher has the final word in the IEP?

Val: Well, I suppose they are the roster teacher. They are the special education expert. They are the only ones that are really writing the IEP. They are the ones who are helping the student set the goals. They are the ones that are monitoring those students as well. They are the ones that spend a lot of time with the student and know them better than anybody else.

In a follow-up question, Val was asked to expand on what she meant regarding the special education instructor being the expert due to the extended time they spend with students over that of other members on the IEP team:

Ken: You say that the years of experience, or the more experience a teacher has with a student the more they are an expert of that child's needs over others on the IEP team. Does that make the special education teacher the expert?

Val: I would say it does. In a rare situation, I've had experience with kids from the time that they are freshmen up until the time they are seniors. You know that's coincidental. That's how their schedule worked. However, I would say that many times the roster teacher knows the kid the best.

As the influence that the special education teacher has on the IEP team was discussed, the parent often used words like “I trust him,” “he knows more about that than I do” and “he knows Sarah better than anybody.” The use of the word expert was never simply articulated by Linda, but the inference was there nonetheless. When talking about making decisions, she stated:

It’s a compromise. It’s a give and take. I’m pretty easygoing. And so, I trust him. I mean I trust Dale and I think that plays a big role in it. If he comes to me and says, “I think this.” For instance, “I think that she doesn’t need this anymore. I think we need to start working towards seeing if she can do this by herself.” I trust him. He’s with her all day long.

At one point in the interview Linda was briefly interrupted by Dale who needed to get some input from Linda. The exchange was give and take. Smiles exchanged. Their heads nodded in acknowledgment of each others contribution to the conversation. In essence, it was their role in problem-solving:

Linda: (As she looked at a reminder she had jotted on a piece of scratch paper.) I had put a note on here to remind me to ask if we could talk about getting extra support for Sarah for speech. I’m not saying that I don’t want her to speak in front of a class because, honestly, I don’t want her to use it as a crutch.

Dale: If we put accommodations in speech into the IEP, it is to be in a small group, right?

Linda: Yes. Whatever you think is best. I mean, like I said, I want her to do well in that class. Because when she goes to college she’s going to have to do this.

Dale: And that’s why I’m hesitant and want to say, “No.” Sarah really needs to be able to perform this skill.

Linda: Exactly! So, some type of getting up front and center and doing it. However, whatever you think is best for her.

Even Sarah suggested that the special education teacher was the one guiding her toward success and ultimately, toward graduation. "I couldn't imagine how stressed out I would be without it [special education services]. So, I'm very thankful to have it because it really has helped out a lot."

Larry's description of the special education instructor's role on the IEP team emphasized the amount of experience and training contributing to their influence in decision-making. "After all, I have been in special education for twenty plus years" was heard time and time again. He repeatedly referred to himself as "one that people look to for answers." Larry did not use the word expert, but he certainly did insinuate that meaning.

What was interesting here was that his reference to himself in these situations was not because of his administrative label, but his special education experiences. Larry purposely voiced his experiences in special education as a reason for authority in decision-making regarding special education students. Numerous accounts were recorded with Larry stating his 21 years of experience in special education. "With as much experience as I have had," "with 21 years in special education" and "I was a special education instructor before becoming an administrator" were all phrases that Larry used to identify himself as an experienced special education educator. Throughout the study, Larry gave me the impression that others "should" look to him for guidance due to his years in the special education classroom. He also believed that these years in special education gave him extensive knowledge needed to make appropriate decisions for special education students, not to mention exiting practices. He helped to support Dale's

view in that experience gives a person considerable knowledge and thus, makes that person influential on the IEP team. Larry stated:

It is not uncommon at all for a consultant to be at some of the IEP meetings. I think it depends on the special education teacher. If you look back at the role of the special education teacher and getting those IEP team meetings together, you know, it would probably be up to the special education teacher to insist or to encourage a consultant or a school social worker, or school psychologist to attend. I mean, if I have a challenging meeting or an IEP meeting with lots of issues I would make sure, I would specifically request, "Hey, can you be at this meeting?" It might have been Dale's feeling that he didn't need a consultant there at Sarah's IEP and he didn't invite any other people there. I think that was probably the case being a veteran teacher.

Again, the "veteran teacher" was given the influence (power) on the IEP team, even in deciding who should attend IEP meetings, based on his knowledge and experience. Dale humbly reflected, "I believe that the classroom teacher is considered an expert more than anybody else on the team." Yet, he, himself held just as much influence, if not more, on the IEP team than anybody else in the eyes of his team members.

General education instructor. "Curriculum expert" were the words often heard when labeling the general education instructor. A little disgusted that the question would even be asked of him, Dale shot back with an indication of being insulted by the question of why he believes the general education instructor is considered an expert on the IEP team, "They are the ones that are with the kids the most. They are trained professionals. They know what will and what won't work." The associate principal Larry added, "I think any IEP team member can present ideas for goals. But, for the most part, I view the teacher as the doctor. They take input and it's actually their job to implement it all." Dale continued with his analogy:

The general education instructor is someone with the working knowledge of the general education curriculum. They can provide input on what appropriate curriculum is. I guess that's the one thing that we were asked just this past summer that was kind of described to us by the AEA staff. That really the purpose of the general education instructor is to provide input on curriculum as a curriculum expert. They do provide that input but they also are providing input, with level I especially, how the student compares with other students in the classroom as far as academic achievement and behavior. It's just another source of information on the kid again, but curriculum expert is really what they are.

Special education law requires that the general education instructor is on the IEP team and actively participates in the decision-making process, especially when a student is to be exited back to the general education classroom. According to Scott, this confirms that the general education instructor has "more knowledge" of the curriculum being taught. Even though Scott had once stated that he did not like to use the word "expert" to identify anybody, he wasn't too shy to admit that the general education instructor was indeed the curriculum expert on the team.

Scott: If it's a trigonometry problem, special education teachers learn that that's a limitation. They send the kid to the math teacher. So at the secondary level it's a different ball game. I think the new laws are going to address that as well.

Ken: Do you believe that the general education teachers are more the experts in curriculum?

Scott: Yes, and that's why they are required to be at the IEP because they can answer the questions about how this students limitations are going to affect their learning in that curriculum.

Val, the general education instructor, believed that she was often considered the curriculum expert, and in particular, an English expert. She stated that this perception was based on her status of being the English teacher, her involvement in curriculum reform for the district, and her efforts to develop relationships with kids to guide them

into being successful. As she considered the perception of her as an expert on the team, she replied:

Val: They probably perceive me as the English expert in the room. I also happen to be one of the teachers who does a lot of the remediation for the ALT test. I probably know the test better than all the other teachers because I experience it more or I experience the remediation more. So, I suppose those would be the areas where you would see me as the expert. But I think for the sake of the relationship with the kid you try not to show favoritism. It's hard. You know? Kids go home and they talk to their parents about their teachers. The parents know who the teacher is before they even walk into the room. So, I think that what we try to do is try to defuse any sort of preconceived notions before teachers meet the parents just to show that we're all here as an advocate for their kid.

Ken: I know that your position is kind of unique to other English teachers. If it's a different English teacher on the IEP team, are they still perceived the expert?

Val: Yes.

Ken: Like you are?

Val: Yes.

This school district has set up an educational success center that assists students with their academics, called The Success Center. Within this center, certified, expert, instructors are placed to work with individual students with various academic needs. During the designated English period, Val was selected by her administrator and peers to work in the center as the "specialist." Discussing the program, Val excitedly replied, "I am one of the certified teachers in the success center. So I'm the language arts specialist. Well, half the day I'm the language arts specialist and we have a math specialist as well." Given her position in The Success Center and as a member of an IEP team, she was asked what it would take for students to be successful in the general education classroom:

It would take really good relationships with their teachers. Possibly if they are not in special education, but especially for the students that are just getting staffed out of special education, I'd recommend that they would, if they had an open hour, if they weren't in a study hall but be put in our Success Center. The Success Center is a tutoring learning support center. Where it's not necessary, we don't have individual education plans for kids but we do know when Johnny needs help with math or Sally needs help with a paper because we work closely with the students in there and we know our content.

Being an expert means that others see that you are trained in an area and have more knowledge than others (French & Raven, 1959; Raven, 1992). Val insisted that even though she may be considered an expert, students will not learn unless there is a relationship built between the instructor and the student. Throughout this study, Val consistently and adamantly impressed upon the researcher that relationships in conjunction with knowledgeable instructors were key factors in student achievement and in making an exit from special education successful. As an expert, the teacher could recommend an exit for a student. In doing so, other team members would more likely be influenced into agreeing with the recommendation based on the teachers' expertise in working with that student. For a student to be successful in the general education classroom, Val commented, "Again, I think that it does come back down to the relationship with the kid. If I can be honest with them [students] then I feel they can hopefully be honest with me. But it is important to make sure that they are comfortable doing so."

The IEP meeting also showed that the general education and the special education instructors were the "experts" at the table. "I trust you," "I know you assess well" and "You're the educator" were common comments made by other team members. These remarks indicated the perception that the special education and general education

instructors' comments were influential during the decision-making process of an IEP meeting because of their expertise in their fields.

Informational Data are used to assist IEP Teams in Decision-Making

Data are to be the driving force behind the decision-making process (State of Iowa, Department of Education, 2002). Influential power can often be at the mercy of a person's ability to obtain information (Raven, 1965, 1992). The members of this team unmistakably expressed that data are a factor in the decision-making process, especially when deciding whether or not to exit a student. However, those in possession of that data hold more influence during the decision-making process of an IEP meeting than those that possess limited information about the student. Through the process of acquiring information, one becomes more influential on the team as data are a factor in making decision, especially exiting. This IEP team often inferred informational power by using the words "data," "problems" and "concerns" as the driving forces behind IEP team decision-making. Cutting to the chase, Dale didn't hesitate to answer the question as to how students are identified as exiting candidates:

Ken: How do IEP teams determine if a child in special education qualifies to be exited?

Dale: That's data driven. Usually for the kids that I have exited this year it's been using the data we get from the ALT tests and from their regular classroom performance.

Val validated this belief as well. She animatedly discussed her passion in that data are needed to make decisions about students, especially when determining if they should exit special education. When asked about what is used to make decisions, she replied:

Data! I think that there has to be proof that they have met the IEP goal. So for example, the data that I would expect would be, if it's a writing goal, I would expect that there is proof that the student has improved in their writing. There is a collection of materials or portfolio which is data driven, that shows that they have improved their writing skills. So there has to be data first and then I suppose we can form our opinions on that data. The data would have to come first.

Again, given that data are used as a factor for making decisions, those with data on a student possesses influence on the team. This was clear when Val gave an example of another student she was working with:

I had two special education students in my class. Both students needed extra help. However, one of the students was able to ask questions when he didn't understand the assignment. With some accommodations, he does fine. He is no straight A student, but he isn't failing either. The other student just doesn't get it. He never asks questions, he doesn't turn in work, and quite honestly, he doesn't want to be in my class. I have to be constantly on him to do his work. So, when it comes to the IEP team, I know that what these students can and can not handle because I see them everyday in class.

However, influence on an IEP team can be shifted from person to person depending on the factors, data, or information as to why the student was or was not succeeding in the general education classroom. Scott commented on this very topic when he stated:

There's not any one voice that's consistently more influential than others. It varies. So it can shift around from one meeting to the next in who's kind of got the most investment in that student. It can be the principal. It can be the teacher. It can be anyone. So it changes based on every situation. And I mean that's, fortunately, that's why we all like education is that each IEP meeting kid issues are so different. I mean it has so many other dynamics. The meetings are never really the same because the problems are always different from kid to kid.

Val believes that data and pertinent information on a student's academic progress dictates the direction of an IEP meeting and whether or not exiting should become a topic of discussion. She also believes that information can influence IEP members in their

decision-making. However, she did state that the lack of information can influence one's decisions as well. When information is shared with all members, in Val's opinion, the IEP meetings ran much smoother. She stated:

I think that all decisions need to be based on a very clear and defined purpose based on the data; and then if we know what the purpose is then the decisions that we make should always be guided on moral purpose, moral ground and high principals. So everybody at the table making the decisions and the purpose is clearly defined then we should be able to collaborate and make collective decisions for a child or for each other or for whomever. However, I think sometimes that the problem is that the purpose isn't clearly defined. And if the purpose isn't clearly defined then your decisions can be very different from my decisions because you are coming from a totally different mental model then what I'm coming from. If that is your mental model and this is my mental model then we have no idea what our collective purpose is then why should your decision be what my decision is. So that's what I believe about decision-making. We all need to be well informed of the facts and the purpose.

Data provided informational influence on the members of the IEP team throughout the life of an IEP. As IEP teams analyze student data, they work collaboratively to ensure student success in both the general education and special education setting. Test scores, progress on IEP goals, completion of graduation requirements, and a student's post-secondary ambitions all assist IEP teams in the decision-making process, including whether or not to exit students from special education services.

Teacher possesses informational advantage on the IEP team. While discussing the decision-making process that IEP teams engage in, it became evident that information gave a team member the advantage over others in gaining influence during the decision-making process. Information provided a person with the power to make better decisions and to influence others in accepting his/her recommendations. Members on this team all

expressed that data are important in the decision-making process. Val commented several times, "It's gotta be data driven." Scott, Dale, and Larry remarked many times that they analyzed the data when students are determined to exit special education services. "Meeting IEP goals," "observations from the general education classroom" and "what are the student's grades" were all articulated by these three participants. In addition, all participants commented more than once that exiting special education for Sarah would mean that she has passed her ALT tests. "Data driven," "provided that the data supports this recommendation" and "if the data shows progress" were all phrases used by all IEP members when discussing the importance of using information during the decision-making process on an IEP.

Meeting state and graduation requirements became influential and impacted the decision-making process as well. Information indicating whether or not a student is meeting these requirements provided valuable data for the IEP team to consider. Larry discussed this topic:

I would think the goals, in some regard are always directed toward what the outcome is going to be for a student in a particular high school and if those goals are written to assist the student in graduating. However that might be, whether it's to increase their vocabulary or reading comprehension, all that's going to contribute to whether they are going to graduate from a particular high school. And I think you have to use those things when you're talking to kids about, you know, when they are disagreeing about what the goals should be. But the goals need to be written so that we are trying to help mold and create a well-rounded student that has the best chance to meet the requirements of that high school.

Dale added, "Basically, input is gathered, or information is gathered from the parents, the student, and the teachers that have knowledge of the student. Then it's a matter of sitting

down and putting all the input together. I think it's to ensure that the kids are getting the best services that they possibly can and to meet state requirements."

Data, not necessarily opinions or positions, create an influence on IEP teams according to this IEP team. They pointed out that information about the child created discussion as to what programming, including exiting, was appropriate for special education students. Dale said, "I think it's more getting the kid to start thinking about, and getting the kid to tell, what they're going to do and helping them to recognize what schools are going to do to get them there." He added, "My role is to have the data that is needed to support the decisions that are made." Reflecting on a time that an IEP team made the decision to exit a student, Val recapped the situation:

I had her in a composition class and her writing skills had grown so much that she really was a regular writer, a regular student. So my recommendation was that she really didn't need any modifications any longer. She grew so much in her language skills and her written and verbal communication. I really didn't see that she needed a whole lot of assistance. And so in that particular situation, I made the recommendation that she didn't need it any more. She agreed. She's like, "I feel pretty good about it and if I need help I know who I can go to." The roster teacher agreed and her parents agreed. So, I guess collectively we made the decision.

Informational advantage was seen to be in the hands of the teachers throughout this study. "I see that the general education teacher has the most knowledge of the student's abilities as they are with the student in the classroom assessing their progress on a daily basis," stated Dale. Linda commented along the same line when she said, "The teachers know a lot about Sarah because they are the ones with her all day." Raven (1992) insists that information provides a person with a powerful influence over others.

With information, a person can use that advantage over others and, to a large degree, possess more influence in the decision-making process.

Student data are collaboratively analyzed by IEP team members. While information is a means in providing IEP members a way to make decisions, it is necessary to point out that all these participants believe that decisions are made collaboratively between the IEP team members when considering exiting. When IEP teams come together, their goal is to review the data, share ideas, and implement plans to assist the student in becoming independent, successful learners. As they conversed with the researcher about what criteria they might use to determine if a student should be exited from special education, assistant principal Larry mentioned:

I think by the student's performance. How they've performed in regular education classrooms. How they've performed, you know, in social situations here at school. Usually it's their academic and behavioral performance in a regular education classroom that leads them to being staffed out. There has been enough evidence or documentation that something needs to be done.

Scott believed that data influences decisions. He believed that students who are being considered for exiting should show evidence of success in the general education classroom. As a school psychologist, progress monitoring was commonly used as an assessment of a student's progress on academic and behavior goals. He commented:

So we would make sure to look at as much data as we can to determine if that's going to be a good decision to exit. We do have a lot of 45 day trial outs and my role in that is to really help objectively lay out the criteria for the team to evaluate the student's performance once the 45 days are up. It seems like a lot of decisions are made on gut, than they are on data. I'm not necessarily saying that's bad because intuition is good too. But for exiting criteria, you really want to have some clear objective criteria. So the psychologist part of me wants to say let's get some real clear definition of what we're looking for. If we're looking at zero behavioral outbursts in the 45 days, let's make sure we drive that home.

As a general education instructor, Val believed that her role was to provide classroom assessments of the student. She stated that data provided her the best picture as to whether or not a student should have more or less accommodations or be exited from special education all together. Her belief was to be realistic about a student's performance when decisions are to be made by the IEP team:

Skills are assessed in most content areas through standards based curriculum. So for example in my class, I have a general writing rubric. It's a four level writing rubric where they are exceeding the standards, meeting the standards, they're approaching the standards, or they're below the standards. And I'm pretty honest with kids about whether they are approaching or below the standards. When you are meeting those standards, that means that you're right on the up-and-up for your grade level of writing. Now I do some individualized grading. For example, if I know a student has dyslexia or they have severe language problems with spelling I will give them different types of goals than students that I know don't have that particular IEP. But as far as assessing, I think it's important that every content area has a certain set of standards that we're trying to measure kids, especially since we are trying to get them prepared for post high school.

Linda agreed with Val. Assessments are essential in knowing where the student is, where they were, and where they need to get before exiting them from special education services. Linda became concerned with the idea of exiting her daughter too early. She commented:

I would like to see Sarah get to a level that she needs to be at. Like when she was in sixth grade she was reading at like a fifth grade or fourth grade. I can't remember exactly, but she was behind. It was more directed on getting math at this level, getting reading at this level, getting comprehension at this level. She still struggles. Her Iowa basic skills tests are low so she obviously still needs help.

However, Dale indicated that IEP teams review the data carefully to determine the best programming for students and problem solve through consensus. Val saw that consensus was reached when the student was kept at the center of the decision. She

stated that the role of each member was to provide information about the student and his/her abilities and then to continue to provide services for the student to become independent. In regard to reaching consensus, she argued:

So when it comes to reaching a consensus, the adults can make recommendations but if the kid is not really on board, especially at the secondary level, we're not going very far. So the total consensus really comes from a lot of questioning and keeping the kid at the center of the IEP.

Data collected by the IEP team was also discussed during the IEP meeting.

Observation of Sarah's IEP meeting illustrated that the IEP team would analyze data together to make decisions during the IEP meeting. In addition, it was noticed that most of the data brought to the table for collaborative decision-making came from the teachers on the team. It was very apparent that teachers possess the informational advantage on the team as they are the ones collecting, monitoring, and evaluating data on a regular basis. Members on this team were seen often referring to the opinion of the classroom instructors or the special education instructor because of the information that they had beyond that of others on the team.

Summary of Second Research Question

In examining the second question, "What are the various beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes that IEP teams adopt through the process involved in exiting students from special education programs?" the following findings surfaced:

1. Legitimate power is used by members of the IEP team.
2. The general education instructor is given legitimate power by other team members because of the time spent with the special education student.

3. The parent is given legitimate power by other team members because of their relationship to the student.
4. Expert power is used by members of the IEP team.
5. The special education instructor is perceived as an expert by other team members when discussing modifications, accommodations, and interventions.
6. The general education instructor is perceived as an expert by other team members when discussing curriculum and assessment of student achievement.
7. Information gives a member on the team influence over others when making decisions regarding a student's programming.
8. Data are collaboratively analyzed by IEP team members to determine services and placement for students, including exiting.

While different forms of influences (power) were used by members on an IEP team, legitimate, expert, and informational power were dominant factors in the decision-making processes on this IEP team. Members of this team believed that collaborative decision-making was used when making decisions regarding Sarah's educational programming; however, much influence, realized or not by the team members, was used throughout the process. The general education instructor was never challenged by team members on "what" was to be assessed, while team members also relied on the special education instructor's suggestions in regard to "how" to accomplish the goals set for Sarah. Even the parent was able to give personal context to Sarah's strengths and weaknesses without contention from others on the team. However, informational power proved to be the most obvious influence throughout this study. Information was sought

and used to persuade, convince, and confirm actions and recommendations taken by this IEP team. “Data-driven,” “what does the data show” and “what was seen/observed” were statements accounted for multiple times throughout this study. Informational power, above powers of legitimate and expert, provided members on the team with the influence to guide discussions and recommendations.

In conclusion, this study shed much light on how IEP teams work together in making decisions and what criteria they use to make exiting recommendations. While meeting IEP goals, using self-advocacy skills and a student’s discomfort with change are all factors identified as effecting exiting recommendations by this IEP team, the adequacy of the general education classroom and post-secondary placement services proved to be the overwhelming criteria used in exiting students from special education services. Beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes that these IEP team members adopted through the decision-making process were all influenced through a variety of power bases described by French and Raven (1959) and Raven (1992). However, informational power appeared to strike through all other influences that were used by this IEP team during their decision-making process. Expert and legitimate powers provided influences in isolated areas of the decision-making process, but it was well accepted by this team that data (information) drove the decision-making process overall. This perception was validated multiple times over as data convergence was described in detail by all members of this IEP team throughout this study.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

During a time when no child is to be left behind, teachers are to be highly qualified (IDEA, 2004), and high school reform consists of the four R's (rigor, relevancy, responsibility, and respect), special education programs and processes are being closely evaluated to ensure that a free and appropriate education is afforded to all special education students. IEP teams are charged with reintegrating special education students into the general education setting whenever it is appropriate. Therefore, exiting decisions will guide students toward independent learning when these students succeed in the general education classroom without support from the special education program and are no longer in need of special education services.

This study on the IEP team decision-making processes had many conclusions. The researched IEP team believed that exiting recommendations are influenced by many factors. The ability for the student to meet IEP goals, self-advocacy skills of the special education students, the adequacy of the general education classroom and the services provided in post-secondary settings were all characteristics that this IEP team considers before reintegrating (exiting) a student from special education. The ability for the student to self-advocate and the adequacy of the general education classroom were the themes most emphasized by this team that influenced their reintegration (exiting) recommendations. The beliefs that a child needs to be self-determined and that the

teacher is willing to engage in differential instruction were also expressed by the researched IEP team throughout this study.

In addition, expert, legitimate, and informational powers were all influencing powers that were used by members of the researched IEP team during the decision-making process of an IEP meeting. While expert and legitimate powers were used most often by the educators and the parent, informational power was most noticeable in this study. Those who had information regarding the student's progress and ability had influence in the decision-making process. In this study, the educators held the informational advantage on the IEP team and were often relied upon by other members to make recommendations, including reintegration (exiting) recommendations.

Philosophy of Inclusion

This study examined the reintegration (exiting) of students into the general education classroom. While educators assume a heavy responsibility to further their students' knowledge, this sense of duty should be aimed at all students, including those that are classified as special education students. However, there is much debate as to where the proper setting should be for those students. The literature points out that inclusion can be the most appropriate setting for students receiving special education services (Denti, 1994; Gartner & Lipsky, 1987; IDEA, 1997, 2004). However, the literature also argues that inclusive practices stifle, frustrate, and limit the success of students with special needs (Handler, 2002; Shanker, 1994; Zigmond & Baker, 1996).

Handler (2002) studied trends in inclusive practices in the decade following REI. She stated that inclusive practices advocated by the reauthorization of IDEA 1990 and

IDEA 1997 have pushed educators toward including all students with disabilities in the general education classroom more than ever before. She found that while inclusive initiatives have focused on all students with disabilities, her findings showed that inclusive practices may not be appropriate for all students with disabilities. She reported that inclusion is better for students with mild disabilities, more so than students with severe disabilities. The researched IEP team agreed with Handler's findings in that they believed learning disabled students are more likely to be successfully reintegrated into the general education classroom than those students with severe disabilities. Handler advocated that inclusion for moderate to severe disabled students could be more harmful than helpful. She indicated that not only do classroom teachers find it difficult to educate students with great disparities from that of the general education students, but that the disabled students become more frustrated and develop high levels of anxiety in the general education classroom. The general education instructor in this study stated that she experienced frustration first-hand when she worked with a special education student who was more disabled than Sarah. However, Handler found that inclusive practices for resource students were not only appropriate in most cases, but necessary in providing students opportunities to become independent learners and to be reintegrated into the general education setting.

“Requiring all disabled children to be included in mainstream classrooms, regardless of their ability to function there, is not only unrealistic but also downright harmful—often for the children themselves” (Shanker, 1994, p. 18). Shanker argued that mainstreaming all disabled students in the general education classroom, regardless of the

severity of their disability, is replacing one injustice with another. He contended that full inclusion is not the answer to FAPE as outlined by IDEA. Appropriateness is about the best placement, not the only placement. The researched IEP team struggled with the concept of appropriateness and the members of the team depended on the educators to define that appropriate placement given the expertise of those educators on the IEP team. While Shanker agreed that the general education setting is appropriate for the mild disabled students, he fears that the full inclusion initiatives will do more harm than good. The special education student, Sarah, had also expressed that the special education room was a nice alternative during times when she needed to focus without the various distractions that a crowded, general education classroom invites.

While mainstreaming of students with learning disabilities was not harmful, Zigmond and Baker (1996) point out that mainstreaming of these special education students was not necessarily beneficial. In their study, they found that the special education services offered to learning disabled (LD) students in the general education setting were superficial and would have little lasting impact. Zigmond and Baker stated that while mainstreaming of LD students in the general education setting does achieve the goal of adaptive education, more training is needed to provide students with disabilities an intensive, focused, and individualized education that LD students may need. However, the researched IEP team suggested that intervention strategies were needed for classroom teachers even with level-one resource students. The IEP team believed that classroom teachers could use differentiated instruction that would benefit all students in the general education classroom and not just the disabled.

Parental Perspectives

Salend and Duhaney (2002) state, "Educators should regularly gather feedback from families about inclusion programs" (p. 62). They point out that parents want their children in inclusive settings and that schools need to conduct more studies that directly ask families what they think about inclusion. Salend and Duhaney's belief is that families will provide educators a clearer picture as to how, not if, an inclusive education program should be structured. While parents of students with severe disabilities were less likely to advocate inclusion practices, parents of those students with mild disabilities saw the necessity of their child being in the general education classroom. In fact, many of these parents are adamant that their child be educated in the general education setting (Palmer, Fuller, Arora, & Nelson, 2001). The parent in this study commented that she would like to see her daughter, Sarah, succeed in the general education classroom; however, she wanted Sarah to also be able to overcome her anxiety and handle her frustrations better. She stated a few times that she did not want Sarah to use special education as a crutch. In a survey conducted by Palmer et al., a parent responded, "The special education program is very limiting and acts to confine people to expected limitations, closing the door to the ability or opportunity to learn because they are not expected to or thought able to" (p. 474).

Administrative Perspectives

Reintegrating students with disabilities back into the classroom requires a shift in thinking on the part of the administrator. Doyle (2003) suggests that reintegration of special education students will require a "shift in thinking, changes in school

organization, and altered teaching” (p. 3). She continues to state that reintegration of special education students is the best way to alter perspectives, beliefs, and attitudes about exiting decisions and will ultimately improve teaching practices among general education classrooms. The administrator in this study believes that reintegration (exiting) practices for special education can not be a uniform process due to the fact that the students are on an “individual” education plan. He stated that reintegration (exiting) criteria would then also need to be based on an individualized plan. However, Doyle states that it is the administrator who must jump on board to provide the path for inclusive education to become a reality within high schools. Bateman and Bateman (2002) tell administrators that their responsibility is to see that they prepare their staff and building for inclusion through resources and commitment. They emphasize that to prepare a building for inclusive instruction, administrators need to (a) provide time for implementation, preparation, and collaboration amongst teaching staff, (b) provide staff development opportunities in inclusive practices, and (c) be committed to the inclusion of students in the general education setting.

Educator Perspectives

The literature points out that support for inclusion is largely dependent upon the severity of the student’s disability, but that many educators support inclusion for the mildly disabled. In 1972, a survey conducted on teacher’s perceptions of inclusion, found that over 72% of the educators asked support inclusion of students with learning disabilities (Shotel, Iano, & McGettin). Berryman and Berryman (1981) reported an 87% support by educators of inclusive practices. Scruggs and Mastropieri’s (1996) survey of

7,385 teachers on their beliefs on inclusive education showed that inclusive practices continued to be supported by educators. The general education instructor in this study also supported inclusion. She stated that she loves to see that light bulb go on when the student finally gets it. Scruggs and Mastropieri commented, "In 28 survey reports, 10,560 teachers were surveyed regarding their attitudes toward inclusion of students with disabilities . . . the responses appeared highly consistent . . . a majority of teachers agreed with the general concept of inclusion" (p. 71).

Barton (1992) also suggested that general education instructors would be more open to reintegration of students with special needs if they had practical information on how to adjust the learning environment to the needs of special education students. Barton continued to say that teachers in her study were "more committed to routine than to addressing various individual differences . . . their mindset was conformity, not accommodation" (p. 13). The general education instructor in this study does not fit this description. Val was very open to differentiated instruction. She welcomed the challenge and invited the professional growth of instructing students according to their learning styles. Given her administrative endorsement, Val believed that she understood the need for inclusion of students with special needs and that her curriculum training has enabled her to use a variety of instructional strategies. Concurrent with this study, Barton concluded that the factors that indicate that a general education teacher is willing to work with reintegrated students from special education programs are when (a) they are given the appropriate training on instructional strategies; (b) appropriate time is given to plan, implement, and evaluate student achievement; and (c) the severity of the disability does

not prevent significant barriers to the learning process of that child or that of others in the classroom.

State and Federal Initiatives

The federal government has also issued policies that include inclusive practices. In 1986, U. S. Assistant Secretary of Education Madeline Will reported on inclusion. She believed that the 1986 system stigmatized students. She advocated that students of special needs could be successful in and benefit from an inclusive classroom when educators are equipped with the right training and the classroom is adapted to suit student needs. She believed that inclusion had become a battle between special and general educators, not taking into account what was right for students with special needs (Will, 1986).

As the federal government increasingly holds states accountable to educating students in the least restrictive environment, classroom instruction also becomes the target of teacher quality mandates. To ensure that students are instructed by content experts, the Teacher Quality Program of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) provides states with the requirements for classroom instructors. In response to NCLB, states are required to ensure that classroom educators are “highly qualified.” The Teacher Quality Program indicates that all classroom teachers must be highly qualified by the end of the 2005-2006 school year. According to the Iowa Department of Education (2005) “highly qualified” means that the teacher (a) has obtained full State certification as a teacher or passed the State teacher licensing examination and holds a license to teach in the State, and does not have certification or licensure requirements waived on an emergency,

temporary, or provisional basis; (b) holds a minimum of a bachelor's degree; and (c) has demonstrated subject-matter competency in each of the academic subjects in which the teacher teaches, in a manner determined by the State (p. 2).

So how does this impact special education? Not only do general education instructors need to be highly qualified, so do special education educators. NCLB(2001) stipulates that by the end of the 2005-2006 school year, special education instructors can no longer instruct content courses (i.e., math, science, English, social studies) without being "highly qualified." This means that special education instructors must hold appropriate certification in each content area being instructed. In an attempt to meet these federal and state requirements, high schools across the nation have engaged in cooperative teaching. This initiative entails having two instructors in a classroom where low performing and special education students are placed. One instructor is the content specialist (general education instructor), while the other instructor becomes the intervention strategist (special education instructor). Through this initiative, inclusion practices are increasing among high schools. The school district in this study piloted cooperative teaching during the 2002-2003 school year with their math department. According to the general education instructor, who also works with the school district's leadership team that creates their annual progress report, math scores went up after implementing cooperative teaching. She believes that the math department and the special education department worked together to bring about an inclusive education for students that otherwise would not have been in the general education classroom. She

believed that the teacher's willingness to work together at meeting the students' needs resulted in a comprehensive program.

Unfortunately, Iowa as a whole has lagged behind in practicing inclusion. According to Michaelson (2005) with the Iowa Department of Education, the federal government is coming to Iowa to evaluate its implementation of providing the least restrictive environment (LRE) to students with special needs. According to state reports on the percent of children ages 6-21 with disabilities served outside regular classes, inclusion was being practiced less than 21% of the time during the 2003-2004 school year. This put Iowa behind national averages. Michaelson reported, "Iowa is more restrictive than the rest of the country. It's impacting state and federal laws. According to IDEA 2004, there is only one curriculum—the general education curriculum" (L. Michaelson, personal communication, April 8, 2005).

The 2005 Iowa's Annual Performance Report stated that 75% of preschool children with IEPs will receive special education and related services in settings with typically developing peers by June 2011 (Iowa Department of Education, 2005). In addition, the Iowa Department of Education provides a trajectory that 75% of children with IEPs aged 6-21 will be removed from the regular class less than 21% of the day by 2011. This contrasts with the 45% being removed less than 21% of the time for the 2004-2005 school year. Furthermore, the Iowa Department of Education has set the trajectory at 12% of children with IEPs aged 6-21 will be removed from the regular class greater than 60% of the day by 2011. This also contrasts with the current percentage of 13.61.

In addition to teacher quality issues and inclusion practices, appropriately dismissing students from special education programs (reintegrating) needs to be evaluated. All members, except the parent and child, of this researched IEP team commented that their school district does not have many students that they have reintegrated. The area education agency representative commented, "Exiting is not common here. I can count on one hand how many we have done it in the past few years." According to data collected by the Office of Special Education Programs for the 1992-1993 school year, only 4% of high school special education students were exited back into the general education programs (United States Department of Education, 1994). While these number rose from 4% to 12% for the 2000-2001 school year (United States Department of Education, 2003), exiting practices are still rare in education, especially in Iowa (Iowa Exit Work Group Report, 2001; Michaelson, 2005; Iowa Department of Education, 2005). Exiting is not occurring even when data shows that it should. Boniface's (1990) study reported:

The more serious charge is that decision makers tend to misinterpret or to ignore the assessment information they have before them. In simulated decision making situations, various school personnel had access to different types of information about a student via computer. All the assessment information indicated normal or average performance or ability. In spite of normal test scores, 51% of the judges identified the child as eligible for special education services. (p. 27)

Data collected by the Iowa Department of Education (T. Stinard, personal communication, April 25, 2005) shows that the percentage of special education students exiting into the general education classroom has slightly increased over the past six years with a 16% average exiting rate back into the general education classroom. However, this increase seems to be marginal at best. So, why are very few reintegration (exiting)

recommendations conducted in IEP meetings? What prevents IEP teams from exiting high school students from special education services prior to graduation? For those that are exited, what criteria are used in making those decisions? Are those criteria the same for all students exiting special education? There are no easy answers to this national concern; however, examining the decision-making process that IEP teams engage in can give a glimpse into the dilemma of whether or not to exit a student from special education programs.

As an IEP team was observed and interviewed, it became apparent to the researcher that ideology and reality conflicted with each other. While science deals with concrete facts, working with people possessing differing characteristics and emotions makes for a much more challenging proposal for educators. Engaging in conversations with this IEP team opened the door to the complexities of the decision-making process that goes on inside the house called an IEP meeting. The researcher began this journey with the perception that influential power is used to keep students in special education for financial and job security motives. To much surprise, this was not the case with this particular IEP team. As their perceptions and beliefs were expressed so poignantly in the IEP meeting and during one-on-one interviews, this IEP team pulled the curtains back to allow some light to shine through the window of the IEP decision-making process.

Conclusions: Research Questions

Exploring the decision-making process of an IEP team that leads to an exiting recommendation was the scope of this study. The researcher began this study with the perception that some students are kept in special education programs longer than what is

appropriate. In search of understanding those influences that IEP team members use to make their decisions, Raven's (1992) Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence was used as the conceptual framework for this inquiry. The focus of this study was guided by the following two questions:

1. How do IEP teams determine if a child should exit from special education and what, if any, exit criteria are used to determine if a child no longer requires special education services?

2. What are the various beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes that IEP teams adopt through the processes involved in exiting students from special education programs?

Through the analysis of the data collected, findings included seven emerging themes: (a) the student has demonstrated that IEP goals are being met, (b) the student has gained self-advocacy skills and is becoming an independent learner, (c) the general education classroom provides adequate support for all learners, (d) the student's need for an alternative setting for post secondary placement, (e) persons perceived to have legitimate knowledge have influence during decision-making, (f) persons perceived to be an expert have influence during decision-making, and (g) information/data influence decision-making. The supporting literature and conclusions of this study have been organized around these seven themes.

Criteria Used to Determine Exiting from Special Education

Student has meet IEP goals. In the area of the student meeting IEP goals, the members of this IEP team (a) believed that students needed to be goal-orientated, (b)

believed that students need to have set and met personal goals established in the IEP, and (c) agreed that multiple data (data convergence) need to support exiting decisions.

The findings of this study confirmed that this IEP team did not use any formal criteria for recommending an exiting for students from special education programs. In fact, no such criteria are even available to assist IEP teams in making exiting recommendations. At best, IDEA afforded only the provision for educators to recommend an exit once special education students are no longer in need of special education services (IDEA, 1997, 2004). Yet, IDEA holds IEP teams legally responsible in placing students in the LRE to the maximum extent possible. Such guidelines allow for much interpretation into what is considered an appropriate recommendation for an exit. In 2001, a group of Iowa educators conducted a study regarding exiting and found some common factors used in exiting special education students. One such factor was evidence that the special education student was progressing toward IEP goals (Iowa Exit Work Group, 2001). The IEP team researched confirmed that meeting IEP goals was a factor used for exiting determination as well.

The literature shows that students who set goals will find focus and purpose which will lead them toward success. Margolis and McCabe (2004) emphasize that goals need to have personal meaning for students. These goals need to be “short-term, specific, and achievable” (p. 245). They describe these personally important goals as ones that students want to achieve and believe will make an impact in their lives. Sarah, the student in this study, stated that she turned around once she made goals for herself. She believed that her substance use and lack of direction kept her from succeeding, but now

that she had goals, school became important to her. According to Margolis and McCabe, “Struggling learners are far more likely to work to achieve goals that are important to them and which they think they can achieve, than goals they view as unimportant and beyond their abilities” (p. 245). IEP goals are to accomplish just that. At-risk students need to set personal goals that have meaning for them and that will make an impact on their life. In addition, IEP goals are established to address the student’s weaknesses that are a result of their disabilities (IDEA, 1997) and need to be continually assessed so that an IEP team, like the team studied, can determine progress toward these IEP goals.

This IEP team believed that monitoring, assessing, and evaluating these goals enabled them to guide special education students toward independent learning and ultimately lead them off of an IEP. This team expressed repeatedly their desire to wean students off of their IEP. However, the data available for students exiting out of special education programs showed that this school exits fewer than ten students a year (T. Stinard, personal communication, April 25, 2005). When asked for data on this school’s exiting of special education students back to the general education classroom, Stinard reported:

The bad news is getting data for [this school]. I was able to breakout that high school for 2002-2003 and 2003-2004 school years, but the numbers were very small. There were 31 total exiters in 2002-2003 and 42 in 2003-2004. The number of students returning to the general education classroom was fewer than 10 each year, and therefore my reporting the actual number borders on jeopardizing the confidentiality of the students.

Hagan-Burke and Jefferson (2002) discussed setting and reaching goals as a means to exit special education services. They contended that IEP goals need to be “clear, meaningful, and measurable” (p. 114). They continued to state:

It stands to reason that critical procedures for ensuring educational benefit to a student receiving instruction in a full- or part-time general education placement included establishing clear and measurable IEP goals and monitoring progress toward those goals. These goals and objectives and the system for monitoring progress should be established before a student's placement is determined (p. 114).

By checks and balances against the student's IEP goals, an IEP team can be better informed in making decisions as to whether or not the general education classroom is the least restrictive environment (Hagan-Burke & Jefferson) and if reintegration is needed.

Rader (2005) agreed that "successful people always have had clear, focused goals that guide them to greatness" (p. 123). She stated that educational systems continue to label kids ADHD, ADD, ODD, etc. because of their inability to focus, and charged schools with the immediate need and responsibility to teach students how to set goals for themselves. By providing students with goal setting techniques, motivation, self-esteem, and self-worth will be positively impacted. Radar outlined six steps to success, which include: (a) choose a specific goal and write it down, (b) decide a time when your goal will be achieved, (c) develop a plan to achieve your goal, (d) visualize yourself accomplishing your goal, (e) work hard and never give up, and (f) self-evaluate. These steps are similar to the process adopted by the IEP team studied in this research.

This IEP team indicated that students should be considered for reintegration (exiting) if they are meeting IEP goals and that multiple data (data convergence) should be used in assessing student progress. This data convergence requires IEP teams to gather data from multiple sources to assist them in making placement determination. Bernhardt (2003) recognized four broad data categories that IEP teams can collect from. These types of data included: (a) demographic data, (b) student learning data, (c)

perception (qualitative) data, and (d) school progress data. The researched IEP team confirms Bernhardt's findings. This IEP team collects all four types of data prior to making decisions for a special education student. Student learning data and progress data were the dominate types of data collected and shared at the IEP meeting observed. These data influenced the decision-making process that occurred during the observed IEP meeting. Bernhardt also insisted that data analysis should be conducted from multiple data sources when evaluating school [student] success. She stated, "Schools can get a better picture of how to improve learning for all students by gathering, intersecting, and organizing different categories of data more effectively" (p. 26). Bernhardt also stated that "a rich, complex picture of a school [student] emerges from the intersection of all four categories of data" (p. 29). Hagan-Burke and Jefferson (2002) also support that as the student sets goals for their IEP, these goals should be continuously evaluated to provide the data needed to make decisions, especially exiting decisions.

In summary, this IEP team identified meeting IEP goals as a criterion for making exiting decisions. While IEP teams assist students in setting these IEP goals, special education students are encouraged to become goal-oriented. Through the setting and reaching of goals, students experience improved self-esteem and motivation. Data from multiple sources need to be used in assessing a student's success in reaching his/her goals. Data convergence validates the beliefs that IEP goals are being reached and confirms decisions recommended by the IEP team that they are making sound, reliable, and valid decisions regarding a student's placement in or out of special education.

Student ability to self-advocate. In the area of the student being able to self-advocate, the members of the researched IEP team (a) agreed that self-esteem was needed for student success in the general education classroom, (b) believed that student motivation assisted in a successful transition from special education programs to the general education classroom, (c) saw passing grades as an identifiable factor leading toward independency, (d) believed that self-advocacy skills in the general education environment are essential for academic success, and (e) believed that students need to take ownership of their education and desire success in the general education classroom.

The researched IEP team believed that students need to learn to ask questions, seek assistance, and take ownership of their education in order to be successful in the general education setting. Being able to self-advocate resounded with every team member as an important characteristic for students to possess in order to be exited from special education programs. While other factors and criteria were mentioned, being able to self-advocate was consistently attached to the condition of exiting special education. Covey (1998) also believes that successful students self-advocate. However, getting a student to the point that they self-advocate can be a difficult battle to win. Covey said that change in self-perception is a “paradigm shift” (p.13). A paradigm shift is simply getting people to think differently and see the world through a different lens. The area education agency representative in this study also stated that students need to be taught to understand themselves and their disabilities before they can succeed in the general education classroom. Scott said that once a student knows his strengths and weaknesses, then they can learn despite their disability. To become a self-advocate, Covey used the

analogy of a bank account. Symptoms of a healthy bank account are when students (a) stand up for themselves, (b) are not overly concerned with being popular, (c) see life as a generally positive experience, (d) trust themselves, (e) are goal driven, and (f) are happy for the success of others. Covey believes that to change from being dependent to independent, a student needs to create a mission statement that includes having confidence and asking questions and trying to live life according to this designed mission. Members of the researched IEP team confirmed Covey's philosophy: "They have to want to succeed [self-determination]," commented Val when asked about what it would take for students to be reintegrated (exited).

Wehmeyer, Agran, and Hughes (2000) encourage educators to promote self-determination in students with special needs. They claim that "promoting the self-determination in students with disabilities should be the ultimate goal of education" (p. 58). This team agrees with Wehmeyer et al. The IEP team members all stated that the special education student has to have the confidence and desire to succeed to be successful in the general education setting. According to Wehmeyer et al., self-advocacy skills lead to many benefits. Such benefits include (a) successful transition from secondary to post-secondary placements, (b) higher esteem, (c) increased achievement, (d) deeper understanding of personal strengths and weaknesses, and (e) strengthens problem-solving skills. Wehmeyer et al. also recommend the following strategies to eliminate the barriers to provide instruction in self-determination that will enhance skills among students with disabilities: (a) give general education instructors sufficient training and information on promoting self-determination; (b) provide general education

instructors strategies, “through preservice and inservice education, to teach students to self-regulate and self-manage their learning” (p. 67); and (c) grant general education instructors the authority to provide self-determination instruction in their content area.

While this IEP team struggled to engage Sarah as an active member in the IEP meeting, they also stressed the importance of the student voice. Wood, Karvonen, Test, Browder, and Algozzine (2004) believe that special education students need to be active members in developing their IEPs. They also contest that “IEPs should specifically target self-determination in the form of goals and objectives” (p. 9). Wood et al. continued to state that special education students should have IEP goals that specially focus on self-determination so that when they are exited from special education services, they are self-advocates and will be reintegrated successfully. Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1998) found that of 895 IEP transition goals analyzed, not one included a self-determination goal. Unfortunately, the observed IEP team did not address self-advocacy in the IEP goals even though they all agreed that Sarah needed these skills to be successful in the general education classroom. Specific examples of IEP goals that include self-advocacy include: (a) I will learn more about my particular learning needs, and (b) I will explain my disability and ask for learning accommodations that work for me (Wood et al., p. 12).

Although the research is inconclusive concerning the influences that parents and educators have in teaching self-advocacy skills, Zhang, Wehmeyer, and Chen (2005) agree that parents and educators need to work together to educate special education students in self-advocacy skills. They point out that parents are less likely than educators to encourage self-advocacy skills in their child because of the uncertainty of how much to

expect from their disabled child and not knowing best practices to use in teaching self-advocacy. Educators must assist families in these roles if special education students are to appropriately acquire self-advocacy skills to survive independently in the general education setting.

Palmer, Wehmeyer, Gipson, and Agran (2004) also advocate for teaching self-determination skills to students with disabilities so that they can be reintegrated into the general education classroom. In their study, findings showed that teaching self-determination skills to students with special needs significantly improved knowledge and skills in problem solving and study skills (Palmer et al.). Agran, Blanchard, Wehmeyer and Hughes (2002) indicate that the student's ability to effectively problem solve is at the root of being able to successfully advocate for themselves. However, they also stated that "limited experience in solving problems may greatly compromise an individual's opportunity to achieve a higher quality of life" (Agran et al., p. 280).

Wehmeyer et al. (2000) indicated that only 60% of teachers surveyed showed that they were familiar with strategies to instruct self-determination skills to students. They recommended that teachers needed more information and training to promote self-determination in their students (Wehmeyer et al.). Thoma, Nathanson, Baker, and Tamura (2002) reiterated this need for instruction and training of general education classroom instructors on self-determination strategies. They reported that "special educators have heard of self-determination as a concept and clearly believe that it is important to teach the core component skills that allow students with disabilities an opportunity to be self-determined. However, the knowledge they received in

undergraduate and graduate programs fell short of their needs” (Thoma et al., pp. 245-246). Val stated that her administrative courses and curriculum work have helped her in many ways as a classroom instructor. In addition, she believed that experience as a classroom teacher helps in knowing how to best instruct students with special needs. While she agreed that many classroom educators struggle with accommodating students with special needs, Val felt that she does pretty well at reaching her students. She stated that learning is a two-way street in the classroom and that when students are willing to ask questions, student learning occurs and in return, students feel better about their successes.

Self-advocacy skills have a positive impact on students’ self-esteem, motivation, and achievement. Margolis and McCabe (2004) point out that “students that do not possess self-advocacy skills lack the ability to succeed, even if they expend great effort” (p. 241). A child’s self-esteem and motivation is greatly reduced in those that are unable to advocate for themselves. Teachers play a critical role in helping students in becoming self-advocates. To facilitate this learning, teachers need to link student work to success, instruct in self-advocacy skills that produce success, encourage persistence from students, and actively facilitate personal goal setting (Margolis & McCabe). Perhaps a greater involvement by Sarah in goal setting would have enhanced reintegration and post-school exploration.

Collins (2001) articulates that while this is true, leaders need to set up an environment that ignites this internal motivation. As the researched IEP team also stipulated, motivation, while it is needed to nurture self-advocacy, must ultimately come

from inside the child and that the teacher's role is to provide a setting in which the child wants to succeed (i.e., be self-motivated). Dicintio and Gee (1999) studied at-risk students and the lack of motivation that many at-risk students exhibit toward learning in schools. They believe that if students are unwilling to be motivated to learn in the classroom, then teachers are responsible for creating an environment that would invite motivation on the part of their students. Dicintio and Gee found that a student's motivation was "significantly associated with the amount of control perceived by them over their learning situations" (p. 234). Motivation is influenced by self-advocacy skills. When students can identify their frustrations, anxieties, and learning needs, they are more apt to problem-solve. Not understanding these factors creates frustration and insecurities in students, and thus, impacts that student's motivation and desire to succeed. Sarah agreed with Dicintio and Gee. She believed that motivation has to come from within herself. When asked what motivated her to do better, Sarah stated, "I just decided that I wanted to graduate and not be a loser." Margolis and McCabe (2004) stated that educators can setup an educational environment that encourages students to be motivated and to self-advocate. They suggest that teachers try some of the following: (a) run well-organized classes, (b) encourage students to be well-organized, (c) treat students with respect, (d) show interest in students, (e) relate curriculum to students' lives and interests, (f) give students choices, (g) radiate interest in the lesson, (h) stimulate curiosity, (i) cooperative learning opportunities, (j) differentiated instruction strategies, and/or (k) provide help (Margolis & McCabe). Again, Sarah agreed. She said that she can not concentrate in classrooms that are loud, out-of-control, and when "kids are messing

around.” Sarah also stated that she likes classes in which she can speak her mind without getting into trouble. For Sarah, having choices [having control] in how to do a project is most rewarding for her because she can choose something of interest.

The researched IEP team agreed with the literature that low motivation produces an obstacle for students in self-advocating. They believe that there is a direct correlation between motivation and the ability to self-advocate. When students feel that they are in control and are independently succeeding, motivation is enhanced. Goldberg, Foster, Maki, Emde, and O’Kelly (2001) believe that motivation is an inherent characteristic and true motivation can only come from within. While it is believed that motivation is spurred on by both intrinsic and extrinsic incentives, Goldberg et al. reported that student motivation is largely impacted by the student’s perception of themselves and their abilities to succeed. “When students do not view themselves as basically competent and able, their freedom to engage in academically challenging pursuits and the capacity to tolerate and cope with failure are greatly diminished” (Goldberg et al., p. 14).

According to the IEP team researched, if students are to be reintegrated (exited) into the general education setting from a special education program, then students must possess self-advocacy skills. “Being able to ask for help is the largest part of being successful in school. I don’t see a student exiting from special education if they can’t self-advocate,” commented the general education teacher, Val. Self-esteem, motivation, and having academic success are all variables identified by both the IEP team and the literature that impact a student’s ability to self-advocate.

Adequacy of general education classrooms. In the area of adequacy of general education classrooms, the members of the researched IEP team: (a) felt that course offerings in the general education system were inadequate for students exiting special education programs, (b) believed that students leaving special education need to be able to succeed in the general education classroom, (c) believed that the willingness of the general education instructor to connect with their students through the use of differentiated instruction strategies provides a successful environment for students exiting special education, and (d) perceived the relationship between the student and the general education instructor as a critical factor in academic success in the general education setting.

According to this IEP team, course offerings in the general education setting are geared toward college-bound students. The team believes that more course offerings that fit into the graduation requirements are needed for struggling learners. Giving at-risk students more opportunities to take basic course work in core classes will allow students to be appropriately challenged and yet still experience success. High school reform initiatives across the nation are pushing school boards to adopt higher standards for students. Unfortunately, school boards and educators have equated this to more credits and higher-level course work and at-risk students are getting lost in the realignment. Johnson, Thurlow, Cosio, and Bremer (2005) believe the consequences of high-stakes graduation requirements for student with disabilities include higher dropout rates, lower self-esteem, failure to graduate, and a rise in the use of alternative diplomas. These indicators will influence IEP teams in not making reintegration (exit) recommendations

for students from special education programs. While graduation requirements differ from school to school and state to state, Johnson et al. indicated that some schools are offering alternative, general education courses to earn the credits needed for graduation. The researched IEP team stated the need for these options at their school as well. They expressed concern with the students' choices in course work if exited from special education and the student's ability to successfully complete those courses without the assistance of special education services. In Johnson and Thurlow's (2003) study, 27 states were found to require all students to pass an exit exam in order to graduate from high school. The IEP team researched identified that passing their "ALT tests" is a major consideration in exiting a student from special education. In fact, the special education instructor Dale talked about another IEP student whom they kept in special education due to the student's inability to pass the ALT test, despite the fact that the student was achieving satisfactory grades in all her classes. Johnson and Thurlow suggest that schools reevaluate the exit exam requirement for students of special need. However, this researcher would propose looking at this requirement for *all* students and looking at the curriculum course offerings that teach the skills needed to successfully pass a school's exit exam.

If a special education student is to exit into the general education setting, the researched IEP team believed that the general education setting must provide appropriate curriculum offerings for at-risk students. Members of the researched IEP team believed that course offerings for at-risk students are becoming less available due to the emphasis on college-bound students. When discussing why academic skills fail to transfer from the

special education classroom to the general education settings, Fuchs, Fuchs, and Fernstrom (1992) point out that instruction in the general education setting is typically different in content and format. They state that special education programs allow for cooperative learning, smaller learning communities, and frequent reinforcement compared to that of a general education classroom. For students to be successfully transitioned (exited) from special education programs to the general education classroom, general education instructors need to facilitate goal setting, provide frequent assessments, and engage in differentiated instruction strategies to meet the student's learning needs (Fuchs et al.).

Another component to the adequacy of the general education classroom is the willingness of the teacher to work with students as individuals and their relationship to that student. As stated earlier, the general education instructor Val enjoyed the challenge and was more than willing to teach students with disabilities. She believed that relationships were the center of success in the classroom and instructional practices were secondary. She believed that if the classroom teacher was willing and able to develop a relationship with the student then half the battle was won. Teacher willingness in differentiated instruction is needed for special education students to successfully transition them from special education programs to the general education environment. Differentiated instruction is defined by Hall (n.d.) as:

To differentiate instruction is to recognize students varying background knowledge, readiness, language, preferences in learning, interests, and to react responsively. Differentiated instruction is a process to approach teaching and learning for students of differing abilities in the same class. The intent of differentiating instruction is to maximize each student's growth and individual

success by meeting each student where he or she is, and assisting in the learning process. (p. 2)

Keogh (1990) discusses this need for educators to use different instructional strategies as interventions for students struggling in the classroom. She believes that all students can benefit from interventions, not just special education students. While policy makers and administrators may dictate programming, it is the instructor that is the key person in program implementation (Keogh). Fink (2004) suggests to educators that they need to get rid of their egos, maintain high energy, be flexible, be willing to change instructional practices, and provide interventions to all students. Fink commented, "The bottom line is that I do whatever it takes to make the class work!" (p. 274). The special education instructor and the general education instructor of this study both believe in this philosophy of teaching as well. "You just keep trying until something works," commented Val at one point in the interviews.

Lovin, Kyger, and Allsopp (2004) suggest that educators today need to have an understanding of the learning characteristics of their students, whether or not they are special education students, and instructional strategies need to be compatible with each other. To accomplish this outcome, differentiated instruction strategies should be used within the general education environment. Baglieri and Knopf (2004) point out that teacher willingness is a concern for the success of inclusive practices. They state that teachers are concerned with their ability to meet the needs of both general education and special education students. However, Baglieri and Knopf continue to discuss the need for differentiated instruction and the need to get classroom instructors to understand that differentiated instruction, accommodations, and modifications do not necessarily mean

“separate from the normal curriculum” (p. 526). They believe that differentiated instruction is an inclusive practice that strives to bring that difference back to the norm. Because differentiated instruction focuses on individual needs versus global, political and unrealistic ones, students with special needs can be successful in the inclusive environment of the general education classroom (Baglieri and Knopf).

While differentiated instruction is needed by classroom instructors, so is establishing that positive relationship with students. Fay and Funk (1998) state that students in school today want control over their lives. The more educators take control away from their students, the more kids will rebel in the classroom. Developing relationships with their students should be the goal of the classroom educator. Once a relationship has been established, learning is possible (Fay & Funk). The IEP team researched repetitively commented that success in the classroom is largely dependent upon the relationship between the general education instructor and the student. The general education teacher, Val, agreed with Fay and Funk’s approach and commented that the relationship between the classroom teacher and the student can make all the difference in the world. She contributed the success of her special education students to the valued relationship that she establishes with them and stated that this relationship is the leading factor that allows her to guide students toward success in her classroom.

Katz (1997) explains that relationships are a contributing factor in the learning that happens in the classroom setting. Through these positive relationships, students’ motivation and self-confidence may be enhanced. When there is trust, safety, and respect

between the classroom instructor and his students, student achievement has a higher probability of being obtained. Katz comments:

Those who have overcome major hardships in their lives often speak of a very special person who was always there to help. That person was there when he or she was needed the most, to help in any way possible. That special person offered support, companionship, and guidance. Most of all, that person really cared! (p. 208).

In summary, the conclusions of this study showed that the general education curriculum offerings need to be evaluated so that appropriate classes are available for the at-risk populations and that instructors need the resources to engage in differentiated instructional strategies. Consistent with the literature, teacher willingness to meet students where they are versus where they want them to be is critical to successful transition from special education programs to the general education classroom. A positive relationship between the classroom teacher and the student provides a better opportunity for student achievement. While the bar for graduation requirements, curriculum offerings, and rigor continues to be raised, reintegration (exiting) recommendations will remain few if IEP teams view the general education classroom as inadequate for special education students.

Alternative setting for post-secondary placement. In the area of alternative setting for post-secondary placement, the members of the IEP team researched: (a) recognized that high school IEP teams are compelled to keep students on an IEP when community colleges offer programs exclusively for students on current IEPs, and (b) believed that some special education students could benefit from post-secondary placement options that were solely available to special education students.

The researched IEP team suggested that community college programs which are offered exclusively for students on an IEP influence their decisions regarding exiting students from special education. Such programs offer special education students opportunities to successfully transition from high school to post-high school settings. However, these programs also have an immense impact on exiting practices in high schools. If the researched IEP team is unsure about the success a student will have in a post-secondary setting, they keep that student on an IEP so that they could qualify for the programs offered at the colleges exclusively for special education students. These practices in Iowa could be impacted if IEP teams had established criteria for exiting. Even the Iowa Exit Work Group (2001) concluded that without exiting criteria for IEP teams to consult, exiting decisions will continue to be inconsistent and rare among IEP teams within schools and across states. Because there are no established criteria to guide the researched IEP team, there is no influence used to encourage reintegration efforts prior to graduation.

In fact, Wolanin and Steele (2004) report that up to 74% of special education students entered post-secondary placement in 2000. This implies that there may be a need for special education services at post-secondary institutions. However, there may also be implications that special education students are not being reintegrated at the K-12 level because of college programming exclusively for disabled students. Stodden and Conway (2002) report that while federal policy requires that services are to be provided to K-12 students with disabilities, there is no legal responsibility to provide FAPE to students enrolled in post-secondary education. Education for K-12 students is governed

by IDEA to provide FAPE to students with disabilities (IDEA, 1997, 2004), and post-secondary education is governed by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990). Observing the IEP meeting from this researched IEP team did not provide any discussion of services that are offered at the post-secondary placement level. In fact, no discussion was held regarding Sarah's choice for college to determine what specialized services might be available for Sarah. Stodden and Conway report that unlike IDEA, ADA stipulates that post-secondary placements must provide accommodations to individuals so that they have equal access to their program (ADA; Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, 1973), not necessarily FAPE.

Post-secondary institutions (i.e., community colleges, universities, etc.) are providing programs exclusively for students with disabilities. Prentice (2002) reported that there is an increase in the number of disabled students that are seeking higher education opportunities. She stated that student's participation in these programs requires documentation of the student's disability for admittance to specialized programs and/or services. Treloar (1999) mentioned that ADA laws prevent higher education institutions from discriminating against persons with a disability, both in the general education and the special education settings. He stipulates that while there are disabled students within the classroom setting, instructors must accommodate the student's needs and therefore, students do not need a special education setting in higher education to receive accommodations. Accommodations are offered in the general education setting as well (Treloar). However, the observed IEP meeting for this study neglected to ask the question, "What college are you hoping to attend, Sarah?" By asking this question, the

team could research what services and accommodations are available in the general education setting that may have led this team in making other decisions for Sarah's programming, including reintegration (exiting).

While there is the need for special education services at post-secondary institutions, according to the IEP team studied, these services have an impact on the exiting recommendations made during IEP meetings at the high school level. This researcher suggests that students entering post-secondary placements with a current IEP should be the special education students who (a) have not reached their IEP goals, (b) are unable to self-advocate, and (c) can not succeed in the general education setting with appropriate accommodations afforded them by ADA. In an effort to integrate students with disabilities into the general education programs, keeping students on IEPs specifically because they qualify for special programming at the post-secondary level is questionable practice.

Summary of exiting criteria. The themes that emerged when examining the criteria used to determine exiting from special education included: (a) IEP goals are met by the student, (b) student is able to advocate for self, (c) student's learning needs were met through the adequacy of the general education classroom, and (d) alternative setting for post-secondary placement is available. While IDEA (1990, 1997, 2004), Margolis and McCabe (2004), and Rader (2005) emphasize the need for setting, progressing toward, and achieving IEP goals; the researched IEP team confirmed these needs prior to an exiting recommendation. Yet, another important criterion needed before students are considered for exiting is the ability to self-advocate (Palmer et al., 2004; Wehymeyer et

al., 2000; Wood et al., 2004). The recommendation of needing self-advocacy skills prior to making exiting decisions was clearly confirmed by this researched IEP team. In addition, the researched literature called for adequacy in the general education classroom (Fuchs et al., 1992; Johnson et al., 2005; Johnson & Thurlow, 2003; Katz, 1997).

According to the researched IEP team, students with special needs can succeed in the general education classroom if teachers are willing to meet them where they are and use differentiated instructional strategies to progress students toward continual learning.

Lastly, while research shows that college programs may not discriminate against individuals with disabilities (ADA, 1990; Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, 1973), the researched IEP team mentioned that these programs are having an impact on exiting decisions at the high school level.

The journey through special education programs is a long endeavor made by students, parents, and school personnel collaboratively. With the help of their IEP team, some students find themselves gaining the skills needed for a successful educational experience in the general education setting. For others, this journey never materializes into anything more than the status quo of setting marginal goals and continuing services to provide a comfortable path to a high school diploma. IEP teams are charged with the challenge of providing students with disabilities a free and appropriate education (FAPE). Deciding when FAPE equates to full-time in the general education classroom continues to be a dilemma that puzzles even the best educators in special education. IEP teams are in the best position to impact an inclusive environment for all students. Therefore, this study set out to examine that responsibility and the influences that impact those decisions

made by IEP teams. Through observations, interviews, and reviewing literature in special education, social power, and high school reform, several conclusions are offered. It is critical for educators to understand the impact that exiting decisions, or the lack of, have on special education programs, general education curriculum and student achievement as a whole.

The six members of this team provided a look into the decision-making process in which they engage during IEP meetings. Through their stories, reflections, and candid testimonies, their perceptions of how students exit special education programs were uncovered. The complexity of their roles and responsibilities resonated with every word spoken. Uncertainty was occasionally expressed over how they determine if a child should exit from special education. While many ideas and thoughts were conveyed individually as to their own criteria used to determine exiting decisions, a coherent list of criteria used collaboratively was difficult to articulate by the members represented on this IEP team. Members of this team agreed that inclusion of special education students to the least restrictive environment is important; yet, they acknowledged that recommendations for exiting are rarely suggested. However, by reflecting on their own practices this team was able to identify commonalities used in the decision-making process when exiting has occurred. They expressed that meeting IEP goals, obtaining self-advocacy skills, the adequacy of the general education classroom, and post-secondary placement options were all factors examined when making programming decisions, including exiting.

One conclusion formed from this study was that there was no established or formally adopted exiting criterion for IEP teams to use in making decisions regarding exiting. While the administrator, Larry, expressed that such criteria would go against the idea of an Individual Education Plan, all other members were open to the idea of having a guideline to assist them in exiting decisions. This team commented that meeting IEP goals was a criterion looked at prior to making exiting decisions, but also stipulated that this was not the only criteria used in making programming decisions. This finding is consistent with the literature suggesting that the student's ability to self-advocate was equally as important to this team.

The student's ability to self-advocate was repeatedly stated by members of this IEP team as a factor they used to evaluate whether or not a student was able to succeed in the general education classroom. This team's report were consistent with findings from Pavri and Monda-Amaya (2001) that students need to acquire the skill of seeking help from others when needed. Recognizing their weaknesses and learning how to seek assistance was an important skill that this IEP team believed students needed in order to be exited from special education services.

This study also revealed this IEP team's perception that general education courses are not geared toward at-risk students. As a result, students are less likely to be reintegrated into the general education classroom for fear of the student being unable to succeed academically. As high school reform sweeps the nation, schools are increasing the graduation requirements to include course work that neglects the needs of the at-risk populations (Johnson et al., 2005). In doing so, reintegration practices are hesitantly

approached by IEP teams which results in fewer exits of special education students who may otherwise be ready for reintegration. It is the belief of this IEP team that the academic structure of classes offered as aligned with graduation requirements needs to be revised to provide a successful program for lower-functioning students. This team expressed that they support rigor and accountability for special education and its students; however, they were realistic about the abilities their special education students possess and the probability that their students would experience success in the general education classroom given the current alignment of offerings in their school. Frustration was expressed by many members of this team in that students exiting special education programs need to enter classroom settings that do not possess intimidating content and teaching practices. According to this team, additional non-college-bound courses are needed in the current school structure to provide special education students opportunities to experience success in the general education setting. Emphasis on classes for college-bound students has overshadowed the need for effective programming for non-college-bound students. Exiting practices in this setting are greatly impacted by the lack of effective and appropriate general education options for students leaving special education services and therefore, retention in special education programs continues to be the norm for this school. This finding is consistent with the literature in that limited course offerings for at-risk students impacts exiting decisions for special education students.

This finding is consistent with recommendations that schools realign course offerings that are required for graduation to the needs, values, and abilities of at-risk students (Fuchs et al., 1992; Kroeger et al., 2004; Reschly, 1988; Will, 1986). By

developing and providing coursework more appropriate for at-risk students, drop out rates will decline (Katz, 1997; Prater, Sileo, & Black, 2000) while special education exiting recommendations rise (Powell-Smith & Ball, 2002). In addition to course work provided for at-risk students, teacher willingness to connect with students and instruct with differentiated instruction strategies is needed (Fuchs et al., 1992; Fuchs, Fernstrom, Scott, Fuchs, & Vendermeer, 1994; Weintraub, 1991). Through proper training in differentiated instruction strategies, teachers will gain the confidence to instruct to the needs of their students individually and as a whole, collectively. Powell-Smith and Ball (2002) stated that factors, such as the classroom and teacher/student interactions, have an impact on a student's achievement. They confirm that school ecology "is an important part of any problem-solving process including reintegration" (Powell-Smith & Ball, p. 545).

Community college programming was also identified as an influence in the exiting decisions made by IEP teams. At this school, the local community college offers programs exclusively for students on an IEP. When working with students that are teetering on the edge of going to college versus entering the work force right out of high school, this IEP team felt obligated to provide students an opportunity to succeed in post-secondary programs. One way to grant that opportunity was to continue a student on their IEP so that they could participate in these post-secondary programs designed solely for special education students. By staying on an IEP and qualifying for these post-secondary programs, these students often transitioned to a community college after graduation.

These findings are also consistent with calls from researchers to explore educational assistance strategies that are available in the college of the student's choice instead of directing students to a particular college just because they have special programming for students on IEPs. By focusing on the long-term goals of the student, college programming becomes a case-by-case decision (Izzo, Hertzfeld, & Aaron, 2001). In doing so, IEP teams may explore the array of accommodations that college classes/programs offer within general education settings (Stodden & Conway, 2002; Treloar, 1999) and be slower to recommend the local community college because of convenience and/or past practices.

Beliefs, Perceptions, and Attitudes of IEP Team Members

The second research question for this study was: What are the various beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes that IEP teams adopt through the processes involved in exiting students from special education programs? This question was filtered through the conceptual framework of Raven's (1992) Power/Interaction Model of Influence.

Raven's (1992) power/interaction model of interpersonal influence. This model was adapted from French and Raven's (1959) bases of social power. The five bases of social power presented by French and Raven included: (a) coercion, (b) reward, (c) legitimate, (d) expert, and (e) referent. Raven (1965) later modified these bases to also include a sixth power, informational. While the bases of social power explore the powers that are exerted in human interactions and decision-making processes, Raven's (1992) Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence expands this model and analyzes

from both the perspective of the agent and the target. The agent is the person using influence against another, the target.

This model examines the motivations for influence or avoidance of influence, over and above the extrinsic motivation, an assessment of the available power resources, a cost-benefit analysis of the use of these various resources, the use of various preparatory and stage-setting devices, the implementation of the power strategy, assessment of the effects of the strategy, and feedback and re-evaluation of the power situation both for the agent and the target (Raven, 1992, p. 239).

From the perspective of the agent, six stages are outlined in Raven's (1992)

Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence. These stages are: (a) motivation to influence, (b) assessment of available power bases, (c) assessment of cost of differing influence strategies, (d) preparing for the influence attempt, (f) choice of mode of influence, and (g) assessing the effects of influence. As illustrated in Raven's Power/Interaction Model, the agent progresses through these stages. Furthermore, this model emphasizes that the "mode" used to exert influence can be as important, if not more, as the basis of power being used itself (Raven).

From the perspective of the target, six stages are also outlined in Raven's (1992)

Raven's Power/Interaction Model. These stages are: (a) motivation to target, (b) anticipation of influence attempt, (c) assessment of self in relationship to agent, (d) evaluation of influence attempt, (e) effects, and (f) side effects. While influence is being exerted onto the target, two options are ultimately available to the one experience influence from the agent: compliance or not. This determination is greatly dependent upon the relationship between the agent and the target (Raven).

Raven's (1992) Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence can assist those that are interacting with others in decision-making situations. This model can help

those that are in the position of influence (and those that are not) to understand the bases for their own actions and the possibilities for alternatives (Raven). Within this study, Raven's Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence was used to understand the influences that are at work during the decision-making process of an IEP meeting, specifically in making the determination of whether or not to exit a special education student back into the general education environment. Three of these interpersonal influences conceptualized by French and Raven (1959) and Raven (1965) assisted in understanding the reintegration decisions of this IEP team: legitimate, expert, and informational power.

Persons with legitimate knowledge influence decision-making. In the area of persons perceived to have legitimate knowledge have influence during decision-making, the members of the researched IEP team (a) saw the educator as one with legitimate power to influence others on the IEP team, (b) saw the parent as one with legitimate power to influence others on the IEP team, (c) believed that the educator legitimately knows the student because of their relationship in the classroom, (d) identified the special education educator as legitimately knowing intervention strategies due to their daily use of those accommodations, (e) felt that the parent is the child's first teacher, and (f) saw the parent as the best advocate for the child.

French and Raven (1959) and Raven (1965, 1992) express the complexities of power and that legitimate power is one of the most complex social powers used within groups. Gaski (1986) states legitimate power is when Person A is perceived by Person B as having legitimate right to influence him and that Person B has an obligation to do what

is asked of him by Person A. Put another way, legitimate power is “Person B’s obligation to accept Person A’s influence attempt because Person B believes Person A has a legitimate right to influence, perhaps because of Person A’s professional role or position” (Erchul, Raven, & Ray, 2001, p. 3). The person accepted as having power obtains this legitimate power from cultural values that place importance on characteristics such as maturity, physical characteristics and intellectual capabilities. In America, such examples are a policeman having legitimate power when interacting with a lawbreaker, the elderly having legitimate power over young people, and a wife teaching her husband how to cook. In this study, it was apparent that the educators and parent had legitimate power to influence decisions concerning the student. Further explanation is that legitimate power is often associated with persons who are required to direct the behavior of others (Klein, 1998). In the researched IEP team, the special education and general education instructors’ duty to ensure the student’s success gave legitimacy to the educators. Additionally, given the nature of a parent’s role to watch over their child’s future, the parent was also given legitimate influence to make decisions on the IEP team.

During this study, legitimate power was used by members of the IEP team during the decision-making process of the IEP meeting. The IEP team researched identified the educators and the parent as ones with legitimate power over the other members of the IEP team, especially the student. Erchul et al. (2001) point out that when the educator is the influencing agent, the motivation to influence is that to benefit the student. This legitimate influence was given to the educators by the other members of the IEP team because of their position and relationship to the student.

Raven and Kruglanski (1970) conclude that legitimate power is used when a person is “legitimately expected to comply with the requests of another person who depends upon him” (p. 75). To successfully have legitimate power over another, Raven and Kruglanski stated that the one with power has perceived differences from the one whom power is being exerted upon. Raven and Kruglanski refer to the following reasons for a person to exert power over others: (a) likelihood of long-lasting change; (b) costs of power; (c) desire for continued dependence; (d) distrust of others; (e) frustration, hostility, and displacement of aggression; (f) legitimacy; and (g) self-esteem and need for power. While one can argue that power used was from legitimate reasons, legitimate power does not always imply acceptance from the one being influenced. “Legitimate power will not reduce conflict unless there is mutual acceptance of the basis of legitimacy” (Raven & Kruglanski, p. 95). Therefore, IEP team members who possess legitimate power need to understand that negative outcomes may occur from their use of legitimate power during the IEP decision-making process.

The researched IEP team believed that the educators have legitimate influence on the IEP team because of their extensive knowledge of the student, of the student’s progress, and of instructional practices. Prior to making decisions during IEP meetings, the educators’ perspectives and opinions carry much weight and the other members often approve the recommendations put forth by the educators. Hatch (2005) admits that there is “no single formula or prototype that defines what kinds of teachers have an impact on others” (p. 1005). He goes on to state:

In contrast to traditional leaders whose impact on others often relies on the power, authority, and control that can come with their formal positions in organizational

hierarchies, the impact these teachers have comes from their expertise, credibility, and influence they bring to their activities (p. 1005).

The IEP team researched agreed that the teacher's legitimacy is largely dependent upon their credibility as an educator and what they stand for as a professional. Hatch also stated that the influence of educators rests on what they do and say and how they present themselves in other forms of representation. This was confirmed in this study. The researched IEP team members believe in the professionalism and ability of the educators in their district and the educators' ability to effectively work with students. This trust for educators in this system lends itself to allowing educators to influence the decision-making process during IEP meetings.

The parent can also be the influencing agent on the IEP team. The researched IEP team showed that the mother was given legitimate power by the other team members because of their belief that the parent is an advocate for the student and "knows the student best" because she is the parent. Muscott (2002) points this out as he tells his readers that professionals are just now beginning to listen to parents at IEP meetings because of the legitimacy of the parents' perspectives. Erchul et al. (2001) give examples of statements used that display legitimate power being used between people: "It is my job to tell you how to handle this situation", "I have the right to request this or that", and "As a parent, he has an obligation to do as I say" (p. 21). Similar statements were used while observing this IEP meeting and within the interviews conducted with the IEP team members to confirm that legitimate influences were used by the parent. In one such incident, the mother stated that she had a right to ask for services because she was the mother and knew her child the best.

The National Center on Secondary Education and Transition (NCSET) and PACER Center (2002) suggest that parents are needed at IEP meetings to advocate for their child. The researched IEP team agreed that parents are needed at IEP meetings. In fact, the associate principal even stated that IEP meetings take on a different flavor when the parents are there. He stated that parents provide more qualitative data to the team that assist in better decisions for the student. As the child transitions from high school to post-secondary placements, parents are the most legitimate support person for their child. NCSET and PACER support this view by stating, "Parents are a key part of the support network their child needs to succeed in the post-secondary environment" (p. 3). Their literature focused on the parent's role with their child at the post-secondary level. In NCSET and PACER's study, they expressed that the parents have a legitimate influence on their child because of the relationship that exists. Because of the relationship established with their child, NCSET and PACER suggest that parents need to become mentors to their children once their child enters a post-secondary institution. As mentors, parents can give legitimate support while allowing the child to be challenged and be responsible for their own decision-making. NCSET and PACER stated, "A handful of recent studies confirm the value of the supports parents provide at the post-secondary level and indicate parent involvement can [legitimately] foster self-determination" (p. 5). In comparison, the researched IEP parent also plays an important role on their child's IEP team. When members of the IEP team believe that the parent legitimately knows and understands the child better than anyone else on the IEP team, the parent is capable of influencing the decision-making process that occurs during an IEP meeting.

IDEA (1997, 2004) sets the expectation for active participation from parents because of their legitimate role on the IEP team. In the researched study, the general education instructor Val even acknowledged, "The parent knows Sarah the best." In McKerrow's (1996) study, she examined the role that parent advocates play in the decision-making process. Her study acknowledged that parents have a legitimate relationship with their child and should be active participants in the decision-making process of their child's IEP. However, McKerrow's study found that "none of the administrative or advocacy activities resulted in legitimate shared decision-making as intended by law. Both groups used hegemonic cultural assumptions to justify the build-up of capital to limit the other group's domination of the process" (p. 3). While McKerrow's study showed that parents are not always offered a legitimate role on an IEP team, the researched IEP team suggested that parents do indeed play a legitimate role on the IEP team and that their perceptions are needed to service the special education students appropriately.

In summary, both the parent and the educator held legitimate influences over others on the researched IEP team while making decisions. These influences are exercised at various times during the decision-making process and with varying degrees of modality. Raven and Kruglanski (1970) concluded that while the parent at times can use an aggressive, loud, and/or persistent mode of motivation, the educator is often observed as using a soft, reassuring, and/or nurturing approach to problem-solving. This was confirmed in the observation of the researched IEP team. The mother was very persistent in getting Sarah out of having to make a speech in front of the whole class.

Whereas, the special education instructor and the general education instructor kept their voices soft and reassured the mother that Sarah could give a speech in front of her peers, but would recommend a smaller group of peer rather than the entire class. This recommendation was accepted by the mother and student without much resistance because of the relationship established and the legitimacy of the request from the general education and special education instructor.

This researcher believes that these findings suggest that parents and educators alike play a significant role on the IEP team. Together, they share a legitimate investment in the student's success. If either member is missing from the IEP meeting, the decision-making process is hindered. Both parents and educators have the ability to influence decisions based on their relationship to the special education student and unique understanding of the student's progress and abilities. While IEP team members may concede to recommendations by the educators, parental influence may be just as persuasive.

Team experts influence decision-making. In the area of the persons perceived to be an expert have influence during decision-making, the members of the researched IEP team (a) saw the special education instructor as an expert on the team who influences others during the decision-making process, (b) believed that knowledge of special education law was the responsibility of the special education instructor, (c) saw the general education instructor as an expert on the team who influences others during the decision-making process, (d) felt that recommendations regarding accommodations and modifications should come from the special education instructor or the general education

instructor, and (e) felt that the general education instructor needed to assess student progress toward the departmental standards and benchmarks.

French and Raven (1959) and Raven (1965, 1992) state that expert power is given to Person A when Person B believes Person A has specialized training/knowledge (expertise). There is a belief by Person B that Person A knows what is best. The influence that Person A has over Person B depends greatly on the degree of expertise Person A has in the eyes of Person B. In the researched study, the educators on the IEP team were perceived as the experts by the other members of the IEP team. While “expertise” is a matter of perception, one can only have expert power over others to the degree that others see them as an expert in a particular field (French & Raven; Raven). According to Frost and Stahelski (1988), this is sometimes done by showcasing diplomas, awards, and honors. Other attempts to encourage expert influence are by using specialized jargon, self-promotion, and/or reiterating the obtainment of superior knowledge on a particular subject. Again, in this study, both the special education and general education instructors were considered the “experts” by the other IEP team members.

Muscott (2002) points out that while parents do have legitimate knowledge regarding their child, they are more of a true expert on their child and educators need to act more like consultants to parents. The IEP team researched agreed that parents have a role in their child’s educational programming; however, they saw the parent as having legitimate knowledge more than expert knowledge. Even the parent on this team said that she consented more to the recommendations of the educators (special education and

general education instructors) because, in her eyes, the educators had the training and expertise to make those recommendation. The general education instructor Val commented, "Yes. I guess the others on the IEP team do see me as the expert. I think that is because I have been trained in this area and have done a lot of work designing our ALT assessments."

Raven (1992) illustrates that the latter stages of the model relate to the effects resulting from the influences used by the agent. As they recommend decisions, the educators of the IEP team researched carefully used their expertise as leverage to influence the decisions that were made to avoid any negative effects that could result. Gaski (1995) points out that the use of data, the words "in my professional opinion," and recollecting past incidents to relate to the current situation were all tactics used to exert their influence as experts.

The researched IEP team discussed the fact that the educators were the experts on the IEP team. Others on the IEP team looked to them as experts because of their training and amount of time that they spend with the special education student, Sarah. Educators had influence over others during IEP meetings because of the perceived advantage. Raven and Kruglanski (1970) discuss that expert influence can be an effective means of reducing conflict, "provided that there is a high degree of trust" (p. 76). The members on this team repeatedly commented on the trust level given to both the general education and special education instructors. Raven (1992) suggests that the mode in which the influence is exerted is important to the influences being used. On this team, the

educator's mode of influence is done through providing information regarding the student's progress which confirms their position as the "expert" on the IEP team.

According to O'Conner and Fish (1998), expert instructors have superior self-monitoring skills, articulate qualitatively, are quick and accurate problem solvers, and can process content meaning in large quantities. "Expert teachers were shown to have a statistically significant higher level of flexibility in their classrooms than novice teachers" (O'Conner & Fish, p. 13). Val attributed her success as a general education English instructor to the classroom experience she had obtained over the years. O'Conner and Fish also suggest that expert instructors are better communicators than novice instructors. According to the IEP team studied, expert teachers are able to adapt lessons based on student needs. Also confirmed by the researched IEP team was that expert teachers are better communicators and routinely use differentiated instructional strategies. Best practices used by expert teachers according to O'Conner and Fish are review of objectives, clarity of message, open discussion, active listening, and summarizing of content. Expert teachers, according to O'Conner and Fish, were also instructors with experience, strong content knowledge, and the ability to connect instruction and content with the student. The researched IEP team confirmed many of these aspects. They identified that experience, content knowledge, monitoring skills, and flexibility (differentiated instruction) were all attributes of an expert instructor.

In Henry's (1994) study of novice and expert instructors, she identified the expert teacher as being one that places emphasis on "informal student outcome" (p. 10) and as being more concerned with student enjoyment while learning. Henry stated, "Experts are

not concerned with making instructional decisions based upon how much the administration, community, or school board will approve [external forces]" (p. 12). The special education and general education instructors that were researched in this study would be considered experts against Henry's criteria. These two instructors were identified as experts by the other IEP members as well. Both the special education and general education instructor appeared to make decisions based on what was best for the child. They did not mention external forces, such as administration or school board members, as influencing agents regarding their decisions on IEP teams. Henry confirmed this study's perception that the special education and general education instructors are experts on the IEP team.

"It is important to do research on how teachers perceive themselves, [that is,] their professional identity. Their perceptions strongly influence their judgments and behavior" (Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000, p. 762). Beijaard et al. conducted a study on how teachers perceive their professional identity. They discovered that most teachers in their study perceived themselves as subject matter, didactical, and pedagogical experts. This is confirmed in this study. The general education instructor reluctantly admitted that she is considered the "content specialist" given her training and experience in English, reading, and curriculum writing. Beijaard et al. commented:

Teachers who perceive themselves mostly as subject matter experts often clarified this by stating that without expertise in subject matter one cannot be a teacher. They wrote that subject matter is the basis for a teacher's authority and for being taken seriously by students. (p. 758)

The researched IEP team also had this belief. Members on the IEP team saw the educators as the experts; and the educators were relied on for their recommendations

during the decision-making process because of this expertise. Beijaard et al. discovered that teachers in their study believed that teaching was much more than transferring knowledge to students. They mentioned that expert teaching is the ability to engage students through probing, effective communicating, and facilitating problem-solving skills. The researched IEP team also agreed with this view of an expert teacher.

In summary, the researched IEP team members saw the general education and special education instructor as the experts on the IEP team. Their belief is cemented in the fact that these educators have years of training, experience, and hold positions as educators in the school system. While they did not have the opportunity to influence others by displaying certificates, diplomas, and licenses, influence was easily given to them because of their positions and past practices as competent professionals. "I trust him. He has always done what is best for Sarah," commented the parent.

Information/data influences decision-making. In the area of information/data influences on decision-making, the members of this IEP team (a) believed that those with information have more influence in decision-making, including exiting; (b) believed that the classroom teacher possesses the most information on the IEP team; (c) perceived data as being collaboratively analyzed by the IEP team; (d) believed that a student's progress toward meeting graduation requirements impacts decision-making, especially exiting; and (e) identified that the student's post-secondary plans are considered for future programming.

Informational power is the ability to influence through the use of information. Raven (1992) stated that informational power is "based on the information, or logical

argument, that the influencing agent can present to the target in order to implement change” (p. 221). Informational influence is usually the preferred means for reducing conflict between parties; however, informational power still has its limitations (Raven, 1965; Raven & Kruglanski, 1970). Raven and Kruglanski state that informational power is not an observed behavior and thus, to influence through the use of information, the target of the influence must believe in the validity of the information being shared. Unfortunately, informational influence is not as applicable with closed-minded individuals. Mooney (2002) states:

Informational power relies on learning, which in turn, results in a change in understanding or viewpoint on the part of the target. What's more, the change is independent of the influencing agent and requires no surveillance. In communications designed to exert informational power, then, it's the persuasive content of the message that's important. To be persuasive, a message requires not only information, but it must be presented in a logical, believable, and compelling way. (p. 1)

Nevertheless, informational power in an educational setting is invaluable. Data driven decision-making is at the core of educational systems and information influences a great deal (Drummond, 1997; State of Iowa, 2005; State of Iowa, Department of Education, 2002).

While expert and legitimate influences were used by members of the IEP team, informational data proved to be the most influential power during the decision-making process in an IEP meeting. Hagan-Burke and Jefferson (2002) discuss at length the need to use data in decision-making. Data should guide decisions about student's inclusion in the general education setting: “Once measurable IEP goals and objectives are written,

they provide a blueprint for instruction and progress monitoring activities and allow for informed decisions to be made” (Hagan-Burke & Jefferson, p. 115).

The state of Iowa has also been delivering a message to educators that decisions (whether in special education or general education) must be made based on data—data driven decision-making (State of Iowa, 2005; State of Iowa, Department of Education, 2002). Raven (1992) agrees that the person possessing information influences others that are not privy to that information. Educators collect information daily on the progress of their students. Unfortunately, other members on the IEP team are not exposed to this data and come to an IEP meeting relying on the educators to supply that information. During the observation of the IEP meeting for this study, the special education and general education instructors carried on about the data they had collected and their interpretation of that data. The other members of the team obviously had little knowledge of the data presented and were not given time to critically analyze what the data could be implying—a possible reintegration (exiting) recommendation.

Reintegration of special education students into the general education setting is rare (Shinn, Baker, Habedank, & Good, 1993). However, information can be a powerful influence on educators who are engaged in decision-making, especially during IEP meetings. The researched IEP team believed that persons with information unknown to other members on the IEP team possessed a level of influence. Informational influence was often given to the educators because of their daily workings with the special education student. Shinn et al. studied the effect that data has on attitudes of general education instructors when making decisions about reintegration. They discovered:

General education teachers' reintegration attitudes are not entirely fixed and can be affected by data. Providing general education teachers with information about special education students in their classrooms' reading skills relative to classmates significantly impacted their reintegration willingness attitudes. (Shinn et al., p. 224)

To reintegrate students into the general education setting, the researched IEP team agrees with Shinn et al. in that information regarding the student's abilities can influence the willingness of the general education instructor.

Summary: Conclusions of interpersonal influences. The use of influence and power plays an important role in whether or not special education students are encouraged to participate in an inclusive environment. This study looked at these influences and powers that were used by members of the researched IEP team in making those exiting decisions. The use of legitimate, expert, and informational power were found to be the most influential factors used by this IEP team throughout the decision-making process. The special education and general education instructors were both seen as experts on the team and referred to as "knowing what is best" by other IEP team members. Their position and training provided credibility to their beliefs and practices in working with special education students. As experts, their recommendations carried much weight on the IEP team and were rarely questioned by others on the IEP team. If exiting was recommended by either of these two on the team, the acceptance of such would be highly probable.

Given that the special education and general education instructors are considered the experts on the IEP team, this researcher recommends that they stay abreast of special education requirements (IDEA, 1997, 2004; Yell, 1998) and best practices in

differentiated instruction (Hall, n.d.; Pettig, 2000). Pettig reaffirms this IEP team's opinion that differentiated instruction is needed in the general education classroom. He states, "Differentiated instruction represents a proactive approach to improving classroom learning for all students" (Pettig, p. 14). Pettig gives educators the following advice on using differentiated instruction in the classroom: (a) get a buddy and learn with a peer, (b) align your objectives, (c) find out what students know, (d) plan flexible grouping, (e) encourage student responsibility, and (f) provide choice.

In addition, special education and general education instructors should understand fully their influence on other members of the IEP team when making recommendations. They must understand that others will more-than-likely submit to their perceived expertise (Erchul et al., 2001; Gaski, 1995; Muscott, 2002; Raven, 1992). Special education and general education instructors must understand the responsibility that comes with this influence and the opportunities they have in making appropriate exiting recommendations. While Gaski points out that expert power is evident when the agent has the ability to change the behavior of the target because of the target's belief in the agent's expertise/knowledge above that of the target, expert power can also be present when the agent is unaware of this influential ability. Expert power is even present when the target's perception of the agent's expertise is misguided. This is because expert power is given according to the target's perceptions of the agent's ability over that of the target. In short, expert power is only as strong as the target's belief that he or she is less knowledgeable than the agent (Gaski).

Finally, information data possess the most influence in the decision-making process during an IEP meeting. Those with information have influence (Raven, 1992; State of Iowa, 2002). The researched IEP team explained that decisions made on an IEP were data driven. Data were used to assess progress, evaluate success, and support recommendations. Again, the educators on the IEP team were seen as ones with the informational advantage on the team. This was pointed out by many team members and the reason given was because of the educator's consistent relationship with the student. While the parent, administrator and AEA representative can all supply information to assist in decision-making, the bulk of the information collected, analyzed, and evaluated was done by the classroom teacher and the special education instructor. Even the student possessed limited informational knowledge because of the student's narrow participation in the collecting and analyzing of the data. The findings in this study revealed that members on the IEP team that possess information beyond that of other team members are granted greater influence over others in the decision-making process (Klein, 1998; Raven, 1965,1992; Raven & Kruglanski, 1970).

Implications

Some would argue that the lack of exiting is the result of unsuccessfully assisting special education students in the general education environment (Deno, 1970; Dunn, 1968; Hensley, 1990; Iowa Exit Work Group, 2001). The literature points out that the increase in special education numbers across the country is alarming, to say the least (NCES, 2003; United States Department of Education, 2003), but very few are exiting in comparison (MacMillan et al., 1992; United States Department of Education, 2003). In

the wake of high school reform and accountability, it is imperative that services are evaluated for *all* students which could ultimately provide opportunities for special education students to be educated in the general education setting fulltime and without special education support (Leonardi, 2001).

The IEP team studied for this inquiry does not represent all IEP teams; however, several implications could be offered for consideration. While this study has impacted this researcher's educational practices as a high school educator, the implications also shed light on high school reform for educators alike to consider in making high schools around the nation relevant to the needs of students with or without disabilities. The implications for this study are formulated around the following: (a) parental awareness and active participation, (b) student self-advocacy, (c) educator's responsibilities, (d) scope of post-secondary institutions, (e) obligations of administrators, and (f) the IEP decision-making process.

Parental Awareness and Active Participation

Parents are an important part of their child's education, especially parents of special education students. "I know my daughter the best," exclaimed Sarah's mother during the interview process. In fact, all the IEP team members agreed with this statement and communicated that parent participation in an IEP is a necessity because of the parent's legitimate knowledge of their child. "Parents are meant to play an important role as advocates for their children in the special education process" (Green & Shinn, 1994, p. 269). Green and Shinn also point out that parents of resource (i.e., level one special education students) are quite supportive of inclusive programs for instruction

purposes. In their study, “87% of parents whose children had prior resource room experience were satisfied with a recent integrated class placement” (Green & Shinn, p. 279). The members of the IEP team studied believed in collaborative decision-making that included the parent. Therefore, this study showed that it is imperative that parents take an active role on their child’s IEP team and advocate for their child in the decision-making process.

Parents also need to be aware of the exiting criteria that will be used to determine when their child is ready for reintegration. Unfortunately, most parents do not know what it would take for their child to be exited from special education services. Parents have “a vague understanding of what the criteria were for making changes in placement with respect to LRE or special education exit criteria. For example, when parents were asked whether school personnel had discussed ultimate goals or exit criteria with them at the time of initial placements, nearly three quarters of the parents (71%) said they had not” (Green & Shinn, 1994, p. 276). While all members of the IEP team agreed that there were no criteria laid out for teams to consult when deciding to exit, parents should not look at special education as an end to the journey. Parents should view special education programs as a service to prepare their child to become independent, self-advocating, individuals whose ultimate goal is to succeed in the general education classroom without special education services. Parents need to assist in developing child specific goals and criteria for reintegration.

Student Self-Advocacy

One of the major implications from this study is that special education students need to acquire the ability to self-advocate to successfully transition from special education services to the general education classroom. While meeting IEP goals is an important factor in being considered for exiting, this team agreed that they would not recommend an exit if the student was unable to advocate for themselves in the general education setting. All members of this IEP team stated that success in the general education classroom is largely dependent upon that student's ability to ask questions and to personally ask for help when they begin to struggle academically.

Students need to be active participants on the IEP team. While IDEA supports the active participation of parents and students on the IEP team, the researched IEP team clearly saw the need for special education students to become self-advocates, independent learners, and goal setters to succeed in the general education setting. This study implies that educators need to prepare special education students to become active participants on the IEP team as a step toward independence and self-determination. Hammer (2004) suggests that special education students participate in their IEP meeting by doing the following: (a) inventorying their strengths, weaknesses, goals, and choices for accommodations; (b) providing inventory information; (c) listening and responding; (d) asking questions; and (e) naming their goals. In addition, Hammer encourages students to engage in IEP meetings through the use of appropriate behaviors that consist of the following: (a) sitting up straight; (b) having a pleasant tone; (c) activating their thinking by paying attention, participating, and comparing ideas; (d) relaxing; and (e) engaging in

eye communication. If students prepare in advance for an IEP meeting, student self-advocacy may be enhanced.

Educator's Responsibilities

The special education and general education instructors showed few signs of acknowledging the influence that they have on IEP teams. Neither appeared to believe or relish the idea that they possess a great amount of influence on the IEP team. The words "collaborative decision-making" were used multiple times by the special education teacher, Dale. At the same time, general education instructor, Val, stated, "I don't really consider myself an expert. But I can see where others see that I am." General education and special education instructors need to realize that others on the IEP team may perceive them as the expert and that their recommendations are extremely influential. Green and Shinn's (1994) study asked parents, "How much would you be influenced on the recommendation of the special education instructor?" (p. 274). Using a 5 point scale with 1 being most negative and 5 being most positive, the mean was determined to be 4.1, meaning that parents would be highly influenced by the recommendations of special education instructors (Green & Shinn). With a greater understanding of their influence, exiting practices could drastically be impacted by the educators on the IEP team.

Educators on IEP teams also need to be aware of the informational influence that they have on other members of the IEP team. While factual information can provide a person with influence, so can false information. It is critical that educators bring to the table accurate and reliable data on student progress. Educators must realize the responsibility that is laid upon them by other IEP members when they bring information

to IEP meetings that was not previously disclosed to other members. Members of the IEP team will submit to educators' recommendations if they believe that the information shared by those educators is accurate and correlated to the special education student's progress. The researched IEP team discussed "collaborative" decision-making as an element in the IEP decision process. If this truly is the aim of an IEP team, then IEP teams should consider disclosing all information/data prior to the IEP meeting to avoid informational influences.

As a recommendation, the educators should provide adequate time to review all data collected prior to making decisions regarding a student's programming (Bernhardt, 2003; IDEA, 1997, 2004; Smoot, 2004). Knowing that information influences others on the IEP team, it is critical that all parties have knowledge of information regarding the progress of the special education student in order to truly make collaborative decisions based on data. While the educators on this IEP team were all well intended, data can be and is interpreted different by different people. When only a few members of the IEP team are reviewing the data, only their interpretations are considered when making decisions, including exiting decisions.

In addition to being an expert on the team, it is perceived that the educators have legitimate knowledge of the student's abilities and progress because of their daily connection with the student. The educators, more than any other members on the IEP team, observe, monitor, and evaluate student progress on a consistent basis. Other team members look to the educators as knowing what is best for the students because of these daily connections and the amount of data that they collect. This informational advantage

provides the educators on the IEP team with a great amount of influence during the decision-making process, especially in exiting recommendations. “Informational influence is an important way of changing an individual’s perceptions and attitudes” (Pfeffer, 1981, p. 168). Educators are privy to information that provides the data needed to support recommendations and placement decisions. With this information on hand at the IEP meeting, educators can use that information to influence others on the team that do not have access to that same information that the educators possess. As the decision-making process of IEP teams are evaluated, learning how to better share information (data) with all members of the IEP team prior to the IEP meetings is critical if informational power is to be dispersed.

This researcher recommends that IEP teams take more time to become more aware of the array of services and accommodations available to students with special needs in the college of the student’s choice. If we continue to refuse to exit students solely on the “special programming” afforded at the post-secondary institution, we neglect the responsibility that K-12 educators have in seeing that “we raise kids to leave the home. We don’t want them to be dependent on us once they graduate from high school. We know we did our job when they go out and succeed on their own (D. Scott, personal communication, March 7, 2001).

Understanding post-secondary placement options in the general education setting is also a consideration for IEP team members to keep in mind. Even though community colleges are offering programs exclusively for special education students, IEP team members should also be knowledgeable of the accommodations, services, and programs

offered to all struggling learners at the various post-secondary institutions that students choose to attend after high school. With a better understanding of the spectrum of programs and services offered at the college that the special education student wishes to attend, exiting recommendations may still occur if suitable alternatives were also available. Becoming knowledgeable of these options may provide IEP teams an incentive to reintegrate special education students prior to graduation.

Teachers must also be willing to instruct differently in the classroom to accommodate for student learning. This study clearly showed that one reason exiting decisions are rare is because of the inadequacy of the general education setting. Teacher willingness was one aspect of this inadequacy. General education instructors must be willing to engage in differentiated instruction strategies to improve student achievement of all students in the classroom. When teachers are willing to work with students one-on-one and instruct toward the students learning style, students are more apt to succeed in the general education classroom. In a study by Shinn et al. (1993), 79% of teachers and special education instructors surveyed responded negatively to the statement that general education instructors would be willing to accept special education students into their classroom if special education programs were phased out.

Katz (1997) stated:

A mentor refers to an individual who forms a special, nurturing bond with another, usually younger, individual. Through this bond, the mentor is able to transfer valuable knowledge, wisdom, and lessons of life that leave a lasting imprint. The relationship is often a powerful force in helping the younger person make the transition into adulthood.

The IEP team researched mentioned many times that the relationship between the general education instructor and the student is critical to the success of that student. Teacher willingness to connect with their students and instruct to the students needs have been implied as the recipe to success for students who are exited from special education programs into the general education classroom.

Finally, the saying, “It takes a village to raise a child” is so true in today’s society. With the ever-increasing use of illegal substances, number of dysfunctional homes, and illiteracy in America, students in today’s schools need much more support to experience success than ever before. If teachers are willing to build trusting relationships that foster self-advocacy skills on the part of the student, then exiting practices will not be so alien to those in the field. Examining the structure of academic course offerings, post-secondary placement services, and the influential powers used in the decision-making process of IEP meetings will better prepare students for an inclusive education and that will ultimately lead to an appropriate exit from special education prior to graduation.

Scope of Post-Secondary Institutions

There are also implications for community colleges. All members of the researched IEP team acknowledged that community college programs offered only for special education students were a factor used in making exiting decisions. In addition, these members agreed that some students are specifically kept in special education exclusively for qualifying for these services offered at the community colleges. While community colleges need to be congratulated on their efforts to accommodate and assist students with special needs, where does the responsibility lie in eliminating the negative

impact that such programs are creating at the local high schools on exiting recommendations? If students could succeed in general education programs, but would also benefit from these post-secondary services, should IEP teams be placed in the position to exclude students from an inclusive education at the high school level? This study implies that post-secondary institutions should change the scope of these programs to include at-risk students in addition to disabled students. While ADA (1990) stipulates that colleges must not discriminate and provide accommodations for students with disabilities, “leveling the playing field” as Treloar (1999) puts it, should be best practice for all students, not just those with a documented disability.

Obligations of Administrators

In the area of curriculum course offerings, it became quite apparent that high school administrators need to evaluate their school’s academic offerings for the at-risk student population. While rigor continues to be emphasized in high school reform, administration must acknowledge that rigor is not just about providing advanced placement courses, raising graduation requirements, and/or de-emphasizing lower-level course offerings. Understanding that rigor can and should be instilled in all classes, including special education classes is essential. School districts can achieve high academic outcomes while including all students in meeting LRE (Lipsky, 2003). Administrators must provide course work that is articulated and aligned with the needs of all students. By providing an array of course offerings for at-risk students, a successful and progressive education can be afforded to all students. Lipsky implies that district leadership is essential and that school leaders must (a) work with all stakeholders to

develop a shared vision, (b) re-examine past practice, (c) secure resources for needed change, and (d) monitor progress. As a result, IEP teams will be encouraged to exit students into the general education classroom. Independent learning will be fostered in students when special education programs understand that there are challenging, yet suitable courses for at-risk students that will also meet graduation requirements.

Administrators must also be willing to equip instructors with the appropriate training in differentiated instruction strategies. For exiting recommendations to increase, IEP teams must see that general education instructors are willing and able to instruct to the needs of every student. Educators have reported an understanding of differentiated instruction strategies, but are unable to articulate what that looks like in the classroom setting. Administrators are given the influences/power to provide staff development opportunities and differentiated instruction training is a critical need for classroom teachers.

As an administrator, this researcher understands the goal of seeing that no child is left behind. Unfortunately, this researcher believes that a handful of students are being left behind, especially in special education. These are the mild, level-one resource students whom given the proper environment and training, should be learning independently and in the general education classroom. This researcher sees the need for administrators and educators to work together to create a system of rigor and relevancy so that students continue to increase their knowledge-base, develop positive social skills, and grow into productive citizens of society. This researcher does not believe that keeping the status quo for special education students is fulfilling our responsibility as

educators. As administrators, it is critical that we lead our educational systems into transitioning special education students not only from high school to post-high school opportunities, but we work at transitioning our special education students from special education services to general education placements for independent inquiry and learning that will produce the citizens of tomorrow.

This researcher believes that administrators must provide training for special education and general education staff in strategies for transitioning from special education to general education settings. We must encourage our community to provide the resources needed so that no child is left behind, both in the general education classroom and the special education programs. Additional paraeducators and/or certified instructors may need to be brought on board, as Collins (2001) states. If we are going to go from good to great in education, administrators must take the lead and see that the right people are working with our children (Collins). Providing training, staff development, adequate course offerings, time to collaborate and implement differentiated instruction strategies; and promoting social and emotional support for students with special needs is critical to impacting student achievement for mild, level-one resource students.

IEP Decision-Making Process

There are very few guidelines to assist IEP teams in making the determination to exit a child from special education. All members of this IEP team expressed the lack of direction in knowing when to recommend exiting for special education students. In fact, the administrator suggested that there shouldn't be set criteria for exiting as each case is

independent of others and should be examined individually. However, the area education representative recommended a common “guideline” that could be used by IEP teams to have more consistency in exiting practices. He believed that the state could provide such a tool to assist local IEP teams with their exiting practices. This implication was obvious throughout the study. When it comes to exiting students from special education services, team members expressed an uncertainty as to the criteria to use to guide them into such recommendations. By having an exiting guideline established, IEP teams would be provided a clear method for exiting practices. Obviously, once exit criteria are developed, training must be also conducted to assist IEP teams in how to appropriately assess the criteria prior to making exiting recommendations.

This researcher suggests that IEP teams review how they determine if a student should be recommended for exiting special education services. As a result of this study and through personal experiences working with IEP teams, this researcher proposes using the following as a guide in determining whether or not to recommend an exit for special education students:

1. Student has the ability to self-advocate on a regular basis.
2. Student can articulate his/her disability and can identify learning strategies that are needed to succeed in the general education classroom given these disabilities.
3. Student has made adequate progress toward meeting IEP goals.
4. Accommodations are available in the general education setting that address the student’s learning needs.

5. Parents or school/community programs are willing and able to provide academic, social, and emotional support for the student.

6. Adequate course offerings are available to provide the student a rigorous, relevant, and appropriate program that effectively leads to successful completion of high school graduation requirements.

7. Transitioning goals are intact and a plan is developed to guide the student and parents to post-secondary opportunities and real-life aspirations.

While self-advocacy skills were a resounding consideration for exiting recommendations, having self-determination goals as part of a student's IEP goals would be prudent. Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1998) report that an absence of self-advocacy skills as goals in students' transition plans were present throughout their research. If success in the general education classroom is dependent upon a student's ability to self-advocate, then such goals should be present in the student's IEP. In addition, this researcher believes that progress toward IEP goals (versus meeting IEP goals) is sufficient for exiting consideration. This researcher believes adequate progress is sufficient because disabilities are not an illness that can be cured. Disabilities will be a part of the student for life. Educators are charged with teaching students how to learn in spite of their disabilities.

The above recommendations from this researcher also point out that parents and/or school/community programs need to be willing and able to support the student who is exiting special education. Students, especially ones who struggle academically, need a support system. If the parents are unwilling or unable and the school/community

does not have programs available to support struggling learners, the probability of special education students exiting into the general education classroom is rather low. Without support, struggling learners become at-risk for dropping out of school altogether.

Lastly, this researcher believes that it is imperative that students exiting special education programs set not only IEP goals, but career goals. These goals need to be established by the student prior to exiting. Additionally, a plan for meeting these goals needs to be articulated. By doing so, an IEP team can be assured that a student has a self-regulatory tool in place to guide their success over the next few years. While graduating from high school is an admirable goal for students exiting special education services, goals that extend into the years that follow high school are critical to connecting the student's current education to his/her post-secondary placement and career choices.

Recommendations for Further Research

While all research is conducted through a particular and specific lens, ideas for further research continued to surface throughout this study. In this particular study, Raven's (1992) Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence was used to examine how social powers are used to influence the decision-making process used on IEP teams. The researched IEP team's perception is that an array of course offerings are not available for students exiting special education that would appropriately lead the student toward meeting graduation requirements. An interesting extension to this study would be to see what influences are used when determining these course offerings. How is the academic structure of a high school influenced and who are these influencing agents? By answering, educators may find that influences from central office staff, board members,

and/or the community are dictating course offerings. Another outcome might be finding that funding is misappropriated to other areas within the school system. Yet another finding could show that mediocrity is prevalent within the current system that hinders progressive and much needed realignment of course offerings. Researching and understanding these dilemmas further could provide valuable information for educators in their attempts to reform their current school environments toward rigor, relevancy, and responsibility.

Another possible extension to this study could be to explore how influence is used to build self-determination skills within students. The IEP team researched discussed at length that self-advocacy skills are needed for students to be successfully exited from special education programs. They reported that students need to be able to identify their weaknesses and seek the appropriate assistance from teachers, parents, and peers to become successful in school. How does a student gain these skills? How does an institution educate students toward acquiring these skills? What does self-determination look like? What influences are used to get students to a level of self-determination? Answers to these questions can assist educators in revising their social and emotional curriculums to produce confident, resilient, and determined individuals that will experience higher levels of success in school.

Another recommendation would be to study a homogenous group (i.e., all administrators or all general education instructors) and their perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes regarding exiting. Data collected on this selected group could provide an understanding of how a "position" (i.e., principal or general education instructor) views

exiting practices over another “position” on the IEP team. In addition, gathering data from multiple like positions may provide a clearer understanding of the influences used by these positions during the decision-making process of an IEP meeting.

While this study focused on level-one resource students, this study could also be expanded to see how exiting recommendations are made for children with moderate to severe disabilities. While we understand that no such criteria exists, an examination of the criteria used to exit moderate to severe handicapped students could be back tracked from those that have already been exited to see what criteria were used in the exiting of the student. This information could be helpful in the development of exiting criteria for students with special needs that are determined and able to succeed in the general education classroom.

Yet, another recommendation would be to explore the influences that community college personnel exert in the development of services for students with special needs. While this study focused on the decision-making process involved at the high school level, it is important to understand the decision-making processes that are conducted at the post-secondary level as well. Understanding that decisions made at the post-secondary level impact (influence) decisions made at K-12 level will assist educators in making more appropriate decisions regarding students with special needs. While this study showed little coercive or reward power, the non use of these powers at state and local levels could be explored more fully. If high school reform is to realistically happen throughout American schools, then high schools need to reevaluate their inclusion

practices while working with post-secondary institutions to create offerings appropriate for *all* learners.

EPILOGUE

Twenty-three years after having the conversation with my high school counselor, I am still annoyed with her recommending something other than the college preparatory English course. I often wonder how my life would be different if I had not been able to self-advocate. Where would I have ended up had I not set goals for myself? Was it pure luck that my ninth grade English instructor and I connected and built a trusting relationship that paved the way to my becoming a future journalism advisor, published author, and educator?

After eight years in education as a classroom teacher and now having six years behind me as an administrator, I have attended many IEP meetings. Yet, I still do not understand the lack of exiting recommendations. If students were as determined as I was, wouldn't they want to be in the general education classrooms—making it on their own? With this thought in mind, I leave you with this dialogue from an IEP meeting between myself, the administrator (Ken), a high school counselor (Susan), the parent (Terri), the student (Tim), and the special education instructor (Cindy):

Ken: So do you think that you can make it in the general education classroom, Tim?

Susan: I think we should continue to monitor in special education for the rest of this year. I would hate to see him be unsuccessful.

Terri: Boy, that would be a big step, don't you think Ms. Cindy?

Cindy: Well, Tim has made progress toward his IEP goals. What do you think Tim?

Tim: I wouldn't mind. I have done better in my classes.

Susan: I just don't think you are quite ready for it. What if we cut down the time that you are in the special education room?

Terri: What help do you give Tim in the special education room?

Cindy: At this time, we are just giving Tim a place to complete his work. He doesn't really ask for help any more. We check over his work, but he pretty much works independently.

Ken: If Tim is progressing toward IEP goals and he is able to work independently and succeed, I think a dismissal may be appropriate. We have Co-op classes that have two certified teachers to give Tim the academic support that he may need.

Susan: But after next semester, he would move up to a class that doesn't have Co-op instruction. I would hate to see Tim not getting special education services if he needs them.

Cindy: I worry about that as well.

Terri: What if he doesn't succeed? Can he come back to special education?

Tim: I think I could handle it.

Terri: Shh, Tim. You're being disrespectful. Let the adults talk. (to Cindy) I'm sorry.

Cindy: That's alright. Yes, he can come back to special education, but we would have to start all over with the determination of whether or not Tim has a disability and is eligible for services. It would involve a lot of progress monitoring, assessments, and interventions.

Ken: Aren't we doing that now?

Cindy: (Disgusted at the question) Yes, but it's not the same. We would have to restart the whole process. It is kind of a big hassle. To be honest, it's just easier to stay in special education until we are 100% positive that he is ready.

Susan: I know Tim has suffered from depression. I would hate to see him revert to that stage again if he doesn't succeed in the classroom. I would have to agree with Cindy.

Terri: I think you two might be right. I would hate to set Tim up for failure. What if he couldn't make it? Is that fair to Tim? I would hate to put him through that, wouldn't you, Mr. Hayes?

Ken: Yes. However, nobody has asked the most important question. (Smiling at Tim) What would happen if Tim SUCCEDED? (Tim grins back!)

Disability, hidden or obvious, changes the packaging of our bodies. People with disabilities are the same, but different from non-disabled persons. Educators who build community in their classrooms begin with a view of each student as a person having value and worth. Effective teachers don't assume they understand disability: They ask the other person to describe his or her world. Disability challenges all of us to capitalize on the differences of each student, and to anticipate success in learning. These actions by faculty and staff are necessary to ensure that all students have equal opportunity to participate in education and extracurricular programs. (Treloar, 1999, p. 38)

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APPENDIX A

TIER 1 CODING: INITIAL CODES FOR INTERVIEWS WITH
GENERAL EDUCATION INSTRUCTOR

Appendix A

Tier 1 coding: Initial codes for interviews
with general education instructor

Topics	Initial Codes
Data Driven Leadership	DDD
Collaboration with Teachers	CTR
Community Awareness	CA
Communication with parents	CPT
Socio-Economic Diversity	SOED
Social-Gender Diversity	SOGD
Race Diversity	RD
Special Education Law	SPDLW
No Child Left Behind Mandates	NCLB
Child Center/Driven	CC/CD
Goal Orientated	GOAL
Transitioning Services	TS
Child Advocate	CAD
Special Education Services	SES
Self Advocate	SA

(table continues)

Topics	Initial Codes
Confidence	CONF
Independency of Child	IND
Value of Relationship	REL
Consensus of IEP Decision	CONS
Success in Comfortable Setting	SCS
Testing Mandates	TEST
Academic Responsibility of Child	ARC
Academic Support	ACSUP
Curriculum Requirements	CR
Accommodations in the Classroom	ACCM
Modifications in the Classroom	MOD
Exiting Practices/Procedures	EXIT
Level of Maturity	MAT
Members of IEP Team	MIEPT
Role of Special Education Teacher	RSTR
Recommendations by IEP Team Members	REC

APPENDIX B

TIER 2 CODING: SAMPLE OF CROSS ANALYSIS

OF CATEGORIES

Appendix B

Tier 2 coding: Sample of cross analysis of categories

Theme	Categories	Subdivision of Categories
Demonstrates that student is meeting IEP goals	Goal orientated	Personal goals are obtained
		Behavioral goals are met
		Post secondary goals are established
	Data convergence	Completion of IEP goals is evident
		Classroom observations provides favorable results
Student ability to self-advocate	Self esteem	Standards and benchmarks are met
		Refusal to be labeled
	Motivation	Wants to succeed by own efforts
		Understands importance of education and desires success
	Passing grades	Sets goals for self
		Grades are important to student
		Studying is a part of education
(table continues)		

Theme	Categories	Subdivision of Categories
Adequacy of general education classroom	Curriculum offerings	Student is able to move through curriculum with minimal accommodations
		Curriculum allows student to experience success as well as challenges
		Variety of curriculum options are offered to meet graduation requirements
		Instruction is optimal for understanding
Alternative setting for post-secondary placement	Teacher willingness	Instructor is approachable and adaptable
		Trusting relationship is established between student and instructor
		Person specific consideration
		Perception is that success is dependant upon special education services

(table continues)

Theme	Categories	Subdivision of Categories
A person's relationship to the student provides legitimate knowledge for successful problem solving	Educator	General education instructor has knowledge of students work
		Special education instructor understands appropriate accommodations/modifications needed
		When decision making is child centered, more success is measured
	Parent	Parent is the child's first teacher
Persons with expert knowledge know what is best for student	Special education instructor	Child's best advocate is her parents
		Special education law is best known by the special education instructor
	General education instructor	Accommodations/Modifications are recommended by the special education instructor
		Standards and benchmarks are identified by the general education instructor
		Students progress is assessed by the general education instructor

(table continues)

Theme	Categories	Subdivision of Categories
Data are used to assist IEP teams in decision- making	Teachers possess informational advantage on the IEP team.	Input from instructors and parents are jointly considered for changes in IEP
		Observations from general education instructors provide summative results of students success in the general education classroom
	Student data are collaboratively analyzed	Test scores make a difference on student's probable success out of special education
		Post secondary plans are considered for programming
		Graduation requirements are used for programming needs

APPENDIX C
TIER 3 CODING: SAMPLE OF CROSS
ANALYSIS THEMES

Appendix C

Tier 3 coding: Sample of cross analysis themes

Research Questions	Themes
How do IEP teams determine if a child should exit from special education? What, if any, exit criteria are used to determine if a child no longer requires special education services?	<p>Demonstrates that student is meeting IEP goals</p> <p>Student ability to self-advocate</p> <p>Adequacy of general education classroom</p> <p>An alternative setting for post-secondary placement</p>
What are the various beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes that IEP teams adopt through the processes involved in exiting students from special education programs?	<p>A person's relationship to the student provides legitimate knowledge for successful problem solving</p> <p>Persons with expert knowledge know what is best for student</p> <p>Data are used to assist IEP teams in decision making</p>